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"I Want to Melt Into Her Body": Sexual Empowerment and a Feminist Recentering of the Female Characters in Dracula by Bram Stoker, Carmilla by J. Sheridan LeFanu, and Villette by Charlotte Bronte

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Carson Leigh Pender entitled “I Want to Melt Into Her Body: Sexual Empowerment and a Feminist Recentering of the Female Characters in *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *Carmilla* by J. Sheridan LeFanu, and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë.”

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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“I WANT TO MELT INTO HER BODY”: SEXUAL EMPOWERMENT AND A FEMINIST RECENTERING OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *DRACULA* BY BRAM STOKER, *CARMILLA* BY J. SHERIDAN LEFANU, AND *VILLETTE* BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

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By

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex,* "The normal sexual act [of intercourse] effectively makes woman dependent on the male and the species. It is he–as for most animals–who has the aggressive role and she who submits to his embrace. . . coitus cannot take place without male consent, and male satisfaction is its natural end result" (385). Essentially, de Beauvoir argues that the act of sex cannot exist without the presence of man, but particularly for heterosexual women, the act of sex is dependent on the presence of, responsibility of, and response of men. However, despite the fact that the construction of masculinity and patriarchy dominates the culture of sex, women have often had powerful sexual identities and expressions of their own that they have been forced to repress. Themes of sexual empowerment, sexual development, and women characters taking control of their own sexual identity are weaved through Victorian literature; yet, existing scholarship on Victorian literature favors analyses of women characters as victims of their own sex rather than complex characters. I postulate that the female characters in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula,* J. Sheridan LeFanu's novella *Carmilla,* and Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* demonstrate significant strides towards identifying the power in their own sexuality despite the challenges of gendered violence they encounter throughout their role in their respective novels. The women characters in these novels demonstrate the ways in which sexual behavior and identity is enticing and freeing amidst gender, class, and sociocultural tension. A feminist analysis reveals, through careful examination of each text, that the sexual aesthetic and performance are used as catalysts for the female protagonist's sexual development. These catalysts are consistent not just in the Victorian era, but onwards into contemporary sex positive rhetoric.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the chapter, "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity" from their 1979 text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination,* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, ". . . women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity" (47). They further argue, ". . . the images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men . . . the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image . . ." (48). In making these comments, Gilbert and Gubar urge us to consider the two-dimensional depictions of female characters not just in the overbearing maleness of the Victorian era and eras before, but to analyze the whore/virgin complex as it is depicted through angels, monsters, and projections of uncontrollable male desire. Through both quotations mentioned, Gilbert and Gubar set an important foundation for women writers and female characters in Victorian literature specifically in regards to their sexuality. However, a major point that Gilbert and Gubar fail to address is the choice that female characters have in creating their own sexual consciousness. It is clear, of course, that female behavior is constructed through the bounds of patriarchy, but patriarchy does not

exclude the fact that women work within and around the patriarchy to manipulate the system into getting their sexual and developmental needs met.

The aim of this thesis is to denounce the vicious cycle of victim feminism that reduces women to their trauma, their sacrifice, their pain, and their naiveté. In denouncing these ideas, I argue that female characters have specific control over their sexuality which allows them autonomy, character development, and relatability. Female characters who, by all accounts, are oppressed, will commit acts of sexual defiance in subtle ways that are commonly missed in favor of a more conservative analysis projected out of our yearning to sympathize with a victim. I argue that there are no victims and only characters, female characters, acting accordingly within their sexual knowledge and experience. This idea is supported through feminist analyses of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *Carmilla* by J. Sheridan LeFanu, and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë. Analyses of each of these novels often discredit female characters' ability to feel empowered in their sexuality, but my thesis argues that female characters certainly have the ability to choose and continuously do so throughout the progression of their novel.

The women characters in the three main Victorian novels that I will be working from demonstrate the ways in which sexual behavior and identity is enticing and freeing amidst gender, class, and sociocultural tension. Sexual identity is rooted in our sexual trauma, sexual experiences, and internalized notions of sex. A feminist analysis reveals, through careful examination of each text, that the sexual aesthetic, sexual performance, and the act of sex itself are used as catalysts for the female protagonist's sexual development. These catalysts are consistent not just in the Victorian era, but onwards into

contemporary sex positive rhetoric. While there are no explicitly sexual scenes across the three novels, the scenes can be provocative and thematically erotic through the sexual aesthetic and sexual performance, and, sometimes, depictive of sexual acts that include kissing, watching, or biting as an expression of heightened tension. In these instances, sex is used as an alleviation tactic for personal tension. The tension is a direct reflection of social and political disarray, previous sexual trauma, and internalized notions of sex that are particularly indicative of Victorian expectations.

Before proceeding, contextualizing a few of the terms I have formerly listed as well as terms that will continue to take precedence throughout my chapters is crucial. Each novel follows a sexual aesthetic. Aesthetic, for the purpose of this analysis, refers to the collection of clothing items, colors, prints, and objects that reflect a specific theme meant to convey personal values. This collection is recurring, and is meant to help outsiders understand a specific brand that is symbolic of a certain culture. The sexual aesthetic, then, refers to the collection of items and symbols meant to reflect a woman's sexual prowess. A perfect example of sexual aesthetic is the fruit itself in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. The fruit is reflective of the sexual aesthetic because of the sexual energy the object carries within a metaphorical, literal, and physical sense. The fruit is present in several sexual encounters that happen over the course of the poem, not to mention the fruit itself being yonic in appearance, and its presence makes it a part of a sexual aesthetic. Sexual performance is similar to sexual aesthetic, but refers to the aesthetic being put into practice. In another example from *Goblin Market,* Lizzie returns to Laura covered in fruit juice. Because Lizzie is the one covered in fresh juice, she

immediately becomes the more dominant partner during her sexual intimacy with Laura since Lizzie relies on the juice to live. The sexual aesthetic is the fruit, the sexual performance is using the fruit to sexually entice another person or find sexual confidence within oneself, and the combination of both are presumed to lead to sexual acts.

The next term that I will be defining and describing in detail is Sapphic, which is important for contextualizing the motives, feelings, and relationships in *Dracula, Carmilla,* and *Villette*. Contrary to popular belief, which states that Sapphics can identify more fluidly as bisexual or pansexual, I believe Sapphic is a specific Lesbian identity that refers to the complex, ongoing, intense identification with, longing for, and safety found *only* in women. Sapphic Lesbians tend to see beyond the boundaries of age, physical appearance, and expectations of relationship dynamics including cisheteronormative power and status assigned to one partner in the pair. To be Sapphic is to constantly feel restless without the presence of femininity in romantic, platonic, familial, academic, and career/job settings. Sapphic is an experience rather than a title or part of the split-attraction model. Sapphics also tend not to suffer from the rigidity of internalized misogyny. All Sapphics are Lesbian, but not all Lesbians can be Sapphic. I can refer again to *Goblin Market* since Lizzie and Laura's relationship is Sapphic, and their conversations reveal such. When Lizzie returns from the Goblin Market covered in the juice of the goblin fruit, the narrator states:

> She cried, "Laura," up the garden.
> "Did you miss me?
> Come and kiss me.

Nevermind my bruises.

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices

Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,

Goblin pulp and goblin dew.

Eat me, drink me, love me.

Laura, make much of me;

For your sake, I have braved the glen,

And had to do with goblin merchant men." (25, lines 464-474)

In a quotation a few lines down, Laura states:

"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted

For my sake the fruit forbidden?

Must your light like mine be hidden,

Your long life like mine be wasted,

Undone in mine undoing,

And ruined in my ruin"

She clung about her sister

She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth. (25, lines 478-483)

(left margin) These quotations are significant to the idea of Sapphism or the undertones of Sapphic relationships because of the sacrifice Sapphics make to continuously dedicate their spaces, their emotions, their experiences, and their devotion to women. Lizzie, despite her better judgement, sacrifices her health and safety for her female lover (or sister, I suppose) in a manner that reflects the Sapphic experience.

In shifting from situating terms that will be frequently used in my thesis, I want to give careful consideration and analysis to reviewing prominent literature on *Dracula, Carmilla,* and *Villette.* Across a significant amount of scholarship, academics and scholars often argue that Mina and Lucy in *Dracula* are merely passive participants in their own sexual experiences, that Carmilla is predatory and seeking a vessel rather than companion, that the Gothic elements of the novels override the character chemistry, or, in the case of *Villette,* that the coming-of-age trope dominates the text. Some of the listed views are particularly prominent in readings of *Dracula.* There is often an assumption that Gothic literature requires horrific and gruesome depictions of violence or tension, but the Gothic aesthetic creates and carries the environment for the plot of a novel on sexual freedom. The Gothic aesthetic, which is representative of the low Victorian aesthetic, is a space commonly examined in conjunction with feminist analyses on the novel. In Carol A. Senf's 1979 article, "*Dracula*: The Unseen Face in the Mirror," she argues that the narrator is unreliable, and proceeds to psychoanalyze Lucy Westenra as schizophrenic stating, "[She] exhibits signs of schizophrenia, being a model of sweetness and conformity while she is awake but becoming sexually aggressive and demanding during her sleepwalking periods" (424). Moreover, in Christopher Craft's 1984 article "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," he argues, "A swooning desire for an overwhelming penetration and an intense aversion to the demonic potency empowered to gratify that desire compose the fundamental motivating action and emotion in *Dracula*" (445). Here, Craft is speaking to the uncomfortable desire for sexual gratification amidst Victorian rigidity, and using religious imagery to do so. More

importantly, Craft speaks more to the concept of natural desire and choice whereas Senf, just five years prior, takes the route of nearly diagnosing Lucy as hysterical in order to label her as "sexually aggressive."

Furthermore, to move to a more contemporary lens, Talia Schaffer's 1994 queer reading of *Dracula* examines the cultural significance of *Dracula's* publication coming shortly (one month) after Oscar Wilde's jail sentence for homosexuality. She argues, "*Dracula* reproduces Wilde in all his apparent monstrosity and evil, in order to work through this painful popular image of the homosexual and eventually transform it into a viable identity model" (472). In a similar vein, Dejan Kuzmanovic's 2009 article, "Vampiric Seduction and Vicissitudes of Masculine Identity in Bram Stoker's *Dracula,*" creates an interesting framework in which Harker is the center of both conservatism and subversion. Their work focuses on Harker's inability to develop a healthy or desired identity because of the pressures of sexual anxiety, masculinity, and politics. I review and mention both Schaffer and Kuzmanovic because the focus on masculinity, even queer masculinity, is not the focus of my thesis, but provides a useful context in which to view the male gaze that lands upon other men, not for the purpose of romance as a queer reading may suggest, but for guidance that ultimately leads to deconstructing and denouncing Victorian values. Schaffer contextualizes her queer analysis of *Dracula* not with unfounded claims about Dracula being a queer figure, but with a reflective literary figure that aligns with the history of the text.

Similar to conventional scholarship on *Dracula*, commentary on *Carmilla* often resides in traditional notions of female sexuality. In William Veeder's analysis of

repression in his 1980 article, "*Carmilla*: The Arts of Repression," he confidently claims, "What characters should want conflicts with what they actually want; and at a deeper level, the wants they admit conflict with what they really (often unconsciously) desire. Although men as well as women suffer from repression in 'Carmilla,' LeFanu chooses female protagonists because he agrees with clear-sighted Victorians that woman in particular is stunted emotionally" (198). While 1980 is not particularly, in my opinion, dated enough for such a questionable claim, Veeder adequately expresses, with sincerity, one of the most explicit examples of interpreting the female characters in Gothic literature as one dimensional. Richard Haslam quotes Veeder throughout his own article, "Theory, Empiricism, and 'Providential Hermeneutics:' Reading and Misreading Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* and 'Schalken the Painter," and states that Veeder does, indeed, believe that LeFanu wants to intentionally disregard the bondage of Victorian puritanical rigidity. However, in analyzing the quotation provided by Veeder, Haslam fails to mention that making assumptions about the desire of the female characters is still problematic because the assumptions insinuate that female characters *cannot* communicate their needs or adequately name their desires when the truth is that they often are not *asked* or *allowed* to share. Both articles are important examples of critics speaking over the characters in the novel rather than evaluating the subtext to better understand them.

In addition to investigating female sexuality, commentators on *Carmilla* also focus on psychoanalytic theory. In "'Dirty Mamma': Horror, Vampires, and the Maternal in Late Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fiction," Angelica Michelis utilizes

Freudian and Kleinian psychology to make a point about Carmilla being the mother figure to Laura. She asserts, "Laura and Carmilla's relationship is intrinsically defined by processes of splitting and the dissolution of boundaries: Laura feels simultaneously attracted and repulsed by Carmilla, who looks like her and seems to share her dreams and her personal and ancestral past. At some stage there seems to be an exchange of personality . . ." (18-9). Moreover, in a different psychoanalytic approach, Benson Saler and Charles A. Zieglar apply the prototype theory to both *Carmilla* and *Dracula* in order to contend that Carmilla's character is a better representation of the vampire aesthetic based on psychological assumptions about monsters. However, Dracula is a better example of a vampire prototype. Lastly, the 1991 article "'The Precautions of Nervous People Are Infectious': Sheridan LeFanu's Symptomatic Gothic" by Helen Stoddart employs Freudian theory not to analyze Carmilla, as Michelis has done, but to analyze Laura's nervousness as an enticement for Carmilla. Laura's continued fear, anxiety, and nervousness around Carmilla's affections continue to woo Carmilla until Laura is finally free from the chains of the Victorian puritanical treatment of sex. She does claim that Carmilla "infects" Laura's mind, but what she truly does is encourage Laura to relinquish control over her desires and her body. The idea that Laura gains control over her body through Carmilla is important to my thesis because it accentuates the meaning of Sapphic and the ways in which that word holds value within certain relationship dynamics that will be further explored in Chapter Three.

Intriguingly, the scholarship on *Villette,* a novel which I argue is thematically consistent with *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, also focuses mainly on Lucy's psychological

development during her teenage years. However, Lucy's sexual development and fixation on voyeurism is the question at issue for the purpose of my thesis. For example, in the article "Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*: Forgeries of Sex and Self," Laura E. Ciolkowski argues:

> [Brontë] takes up the tension between the act of bringing into being and the act of counterfeiting in order to redescribe the Victorian terrain in which "authentic" women are produced, policed, and refigured. In *Villette,* Brontë plays with the idea that *all* women are the forgers of a counterfeit figure that is bought and sold with varying degrees of success in the cultural marketplace. (219)

While Ciolkowski's argument is founded on Marxist ideas, her argument is still important within the context of my thesis because aesthetics and sexual expectations are created by cultures dependent on profit which cannot be ignored when detailing sexuality. The idea of femininity as creation and performance is quite obvious in Victorian literature, and creates the basis for the sexual aesthetic. However, in Joseph A. Boone's article, "'Depolicing' *Villette:* Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative," he states that, "In this [novel] where everybody constantly watches everybody else, the greatest moments of private gratification, it would seem, involve violating the privacy of others" (20). An interesting connection between Ciolkowski and Boone is the idea that performance, of any kind, can consistently be a source of falsehood. Receiving emotional or sexual pleasure from invading the privacy of

others, with or without their consent, is an important detail to consider when analyzing Lucy Snowe's sexual development.

Moreover, Kristen Pond's article "The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" reveals that Lucy's unreliability comes from her chosen silence on matters she deems too intimate to share with the audience. Lucy's silence is powerful, according to Pond, because she allows the reader to understand her on her own terms. It is interesting to view Lucy's silence as such because she is certainly in tune with the voices, thoughts, and experiences of the characters around her, but she keeps information (sometimes important) to herself. Boone definitely contributes to scholarship on *Villette* generally and specifically within the realm of analysis on watching, learning, and performing. In another similar example, Lucy Hank's article, "Different Kinds of Silence: Revisions of *Villette* and the 'Reader's Romance,'" argues that Lucy Snowe's silences within the novel are intentionally placed by Brontë in order to leave the reader conflicted as proven by Brontë's notes on the original manuscript. While scholars are having ongoing conversations about Lucy Snowe, her silence, and her invasion of privacy, I want to fill the gap in this scholarship by arguing that Lucy's silence is a result of sexual fascination. Hanks does, indeed, touch on issues of Lucy's sexuality in the novel, but silence is the overarching analysis of Boone and Hanks.

To reiterate, the purpose of this thesis is to add to the existing scholarly conversation on *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *Carmilla* by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë are passively engaging in sexual activity as victims or as naive participants. In the following chapters, I argue that fictional content including the sexual

aesthetic, the sexual performance, and depictions of sex strongly suggest female characters such as Laura not only engage in sex per their own desires and decisions, but also that they enjoy and feel empowered by sex, revel in situations with implied or an opportunity for expression, and develop throughout the progression of the novel because they become aware of their sexual prowess. In Chapter Two, I argue that Dracula is merely a catalyst for sexual development, and this argument is demonstrated through the bond between Mina, Lucy, and the vampire sisters. The subject of Chapter Three will be *Carmilla*, and I contend that Laura's rapid sexual growth is what prompts the appearance of Carmilla rather than Carmilla appearing to encourage Laura's growth. Laura consensually invites Carmilla into her metaphorical and physical space as she dreams, fantasizes, and recollects. In Chapter Four, I investigate Lucy Snowe's sexual interest in voyeurism in *Villette*. Finally, in my conclusion, I place the preceding analysis in the context of contemporary feminist ideas of sex positivity, choice feminism, and modern artistic examples.

Chapter Two: "I Pray That You Will Not Discourse of Things Other Than Business": Nonmonogamy, the Tainted Femme Fatale, and the Reverse Erotic Triangle in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

In Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's 1985 text, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire,* she coins the term "erotic triangle" in which she argues that the female character-centered conflict between two male characters is rooted in subconscious homoerotic desire rather than a genuine interest in conquering the body and approval of the female character. Kosofsky-Sedgwick argues, "Obviously, it is crucial to every aspect of social structure within the exchange-of-women framework that heavily freighted bonds between men exist, as the backbone of social form or forms" (86). To completely reverse Kosofsky-Sedgwick's idea into the reverse erotic triangle, there has to be an acknowledgement that a majority of conversations that are had between women characters are centered around men, marriage, purity, and societal approval. However, these same-sex bonds are shifted entirely throughout Dracula through nonmonogamy, voyeuristic sexual habits, etc. Furthermore, and purposefully, there is no single traditional relationship represented in the novel. They are all ultimately shifted through Dracula's presence but not his control. In the 2005 article, "Feminism, Fiction, and the Utopian Promise of *Dracula,*" Nancy Armstrong states, "By thus usurping the positions of wife, mother, and lover, Dracula strips these figures of their meaning in nineteenth-century porn and subjects them to another libidinal economy" (11). Again, Dracula shifts every conventional standard for relationships in order to reveal a much more progressive figure that commands all female characters and readers to be critical of their own repression.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* revolves around the vampire, Count Dracula, and his attempts to monopolize England after moving from Transylvania in order to spread the curse of the undead. He is tracked and taken down before achieving his goal, and his demise is certainly a representation of the discomfort many Victorians felt with the significant cultural changes taking place at the time.

In order to acknowledge the reverse erotic triangle or the sexual habits of the characters, the contextualization of non-monogamy, the central idea I believe to be operating the entirety of the plot, is crucial. The platonic and romantic relationships in *Dracula* do not function within the rigidity of detached and calculated Victorian standards which means that the characters work from an inherently non-monogamous mentality. I use the term "non-monogamy" to describe any romantic relationship consisting of emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual labor that falls outside of the male/female constructed dynamic. Adultery or unfaithfulness in a courtship are *acts* of non-monogamy, but I focus specifically on how non-monogamy is the trigger for all romantic and sexual activity within the novel because of the anxiety around the Victorian marriage plot. The marriage plot, for the purpose of this analysis, refers to the culture surrounding heterosexual marriage that is embedded within the routines and motivations of Victorian literary relationships. For example, same-sex friendships within Victorian literature often revolved around winning a suitor, being a wife, and revealed the sometimes competitive nature of platonic female relationships. The prospects of marriage control the actions and the behaviors of female characters, but marriage is not important at all to and through Count Dracula.

In *Dracula,* non-monogamy exists in fantasy, in passing moments the characters describe nonchalantly in their writing, in detailed scenes, and non-monogamy is the driving force for Dracula himself. In essence, non-monogamy exists not just as an antithesis to marriage, but as a space where characters situate themselves in order to re-evaluate their own desires. Mary-Catherine Harrison argues, "The marriage plot positions marriage as the thing that matters most, especially for women. Novels center on the heroine's path to marriage; the conventional focus on the female's perspective signals its particular relevance to a woman's life," but the plot of *Dracula* flips her argument around entirely by starting with talks of marriage from Mina and Lucy then quickly shifts focus as Dracula becomes a threat to the purity of the marriage plot (117). Marriage becomes the focus less and less over the course of the novel timeline despite the novel ending in a marriage, but the argument that marriage is not the focus of the romance in the novel still remains. To conclude, non-monogamy is a driving force for every female character in the novel as a way to deviate from the routine marriage plot. Every female character is involved in a non-monogamous, non-normative situation that challenges their perception of sexuality. Harrison further argues, "For women, the idealization of marriage merged alongside its twin ideology, the condemnation of sexuality outside of matrimony. The marriage plot served to contain sexuality, at least in theory, within heterosexual marriage…" (118). Harrison's conclusions set an important context for the entirety of my analysis because Dracula's presence, not *just* the character himself, triggers an overwhelming desire for something sexually stimulating that cannot exist within the marriage plot because marriage is inherently private, "contained," and hierarchical.

Moreover, Harrison's argument will be echoed in my analyses of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* because the women characters in both novels must also confront their anxiety with marriage, virginity, and female friendships. The confrontation of such anxiety is what leads to sexual confidence, the development of the sexual aesthetic, and, ultimately, the female characters in these novels, including *Dracula,* conclude each novel with a greater understanding of their own sexual landscape. Through Stoker's depictions of non-monogamous desire, including the three vampire sisters and their sexual aesthetic, the longing exchanges between Mina and Lucy that create the reverse erotic triangle, and the voyeuristic nature of Lucy's turning and her death that everyone must be privy to, I can conclude that the text reveals a significant dichotomy between sexual exploration and a confrontation of repressed sexual desires that help the female characters grow into sexually autonomous beings. Dracula is the center of sexual awareness rather than an object of violent sexual anxiety (predator), and Dracula's presence is a challenge for the female characters because he represents an embodiment of sexual power. My analysis will work through the timeline of significant plot points to evaluate minor and major connections between aesthetics, behavior, and motivations.

Non-monogamy takes precedence within the first fifty pages because every relationship in the novel is thrown entirely out of puritan orbit when Dracula is introduced, which is immediately proven by the presence of the three vampire sisters, all incestuously related to Dracula, in the beginning of the novel. The three vampire sisters are the most crucial element in setting the context for the rest of the novel because they

are a direct representation of a sexual confidence and aesthetic that cannot exist outside the walls of the castle because of societal shame. The introduction to the sisters is an early example of Dracula's disregard of the Victorian marriage plot. As stated, non-monogamy acts as a trigger for sexual exploration since the marriage plot, in and of itself, is designed to trap women into mundane, set routines created by men. In "Heterosexual Horror: *Dracula,* the Closet, and the Marriage-Plot," Barry McCrea argues, "The exhilarating but frightening experience of young heterosexuals in a marriage-plot is the recognition that their private, physical desires are not fully their own but also belong to rituals and templates outside themselves, that their inner erotic imaginations correspond to, and are even constitutive of, ancient and established social devices" (256). Nonmonogamy exists for the purpose of embracing multiple forms of the sexual and romantic experience.

By eliminating the prospects and importance of "marriage," which requires a public identity and private repression, women are able to choose their sexual experiences more freely (bridging the gap between public and private). Barry McCrea and Mary Catherine Harrison's arguments provide a useful framework through which to view the vampire sisters. The three vampire women attached to Dracula are not married to him or anyone else, and thus they tempt Jonathan Harker to abandon normative monogamy because they, quite literally, have been "turned" to see the other side. Jonathan recalls, "In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them...They came close to me and looked at me for some time, and then whispered together" (41-2).

Consequently, the vampire women do not present themselves quietly as to give Jonathan room to respond, take control, or voice himself because *they* are the ones who are in control. Their energy fills the entire room, and their communications exist only amongst each other so that Jonathan can be purposefully confused and enticed. Their control and confidence in seducing Jonathan is important to the argument that Dracula is a vessel for sexual empowerment because, without his influence or turning them, they would not have learned these means of seduction or communication. Their body language and their "dress and manner" come directly from Dracula's influence. Furthermore, the relationship between sexual exploration and sexual maturity is presented in this scene because the vampire sisters have caused a significant nervousness in Jonathan. Rather than male suitors overwhelming a female character through manipulation and pseudo-charming efforts (Lucy's situation), the women, despite being vampires, overpower Jonathan. He does not have a say in the physicality of the situation, thus giving the women more power. The repressed person here is Jonathan, but their sheer presence invokes such a response that it is fair to say that their existence is threatening to men and women. By having the vampire sisters set the tone for Jonathan's stay in the castle, they create a dichotomy between female sexuality that is meant to be left in the darkness, so to speak, and the commitment to sexual safety. Rather than the sisters crossing literal boundaries to endanger Jonathan, they cross Victorian cultural and aesthetic boundaries by taking control of a situation meant to be empowering for themselves and other women.

As mentioned previously, the women that live with Dracula are already sexually empowered, which is why they are described in distinctive ways with distinct aesthetics. Phyllis A. Roth asserts in "Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula,*" "Moreover, I would emphasize that for both the Victorians and the twentieth century readers, much of the novel's great appeal derives from its hostility toward female sexuality" (411). One implication of Roth's statement is that the novel itself, Stoker's creation, creates hostility towards female sexuality that aims to educate the reader on the dangers of sexual "recklessness" (confidence). However, Roth's statement is an insightful exploration of the challenge the text gives women to ask themselves, "Why are we supposed to feel shame for wanting to explore a dangerous sexuality?" The "dangerous sexuality" mentioned is constructed through sexual aesthetic and sexual performance. An early and significant example of sexual aesthetic and performance is the description of the three women. Jonathan describes:

> Two were dark...and [had] great dark, piercing eyes that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon. The other was fair, as fair as can be, with great wavy masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires...All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips...There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. (42-43)

Each physical detail mentioned holds importance and value within the sexual aesthetic/sexual performance to sex framework. The light hair of each female suitor is representative of Victorian fetishism because light features, particularly light skin, are a symbol of purity, cleanliness, and femininity. Their skin is described as "fair" although their bodily presence is "dark," and the difference between both descriptions marks the difference between female characters that are sexually immature and characters that are sexually enticing. Moreover, the continuous mention of the color red is important in both the aesthetic landscape of the novel and the sexual aesthetic of the female characters. Not only have the women suitors had their fill of blood, a thinly veiled metaphor for sexual consumption, but they have had their fill of said sex, and this is shown through the coloring of their lips and tongue which act as their main sexual device. Finally, the comparison to an "animal" is a remark on the sexual eagerness of the women (42). I refer to Roth again who candidly states that, "Perhaps nowhere is the dichotomy of sensual and sexless woman more dramatic than it is in *Dracula* and nowhere is the suddenly sexual woman more violently and self-righteously persecuted than in Stoker's 'thriller'" (412). In summation, Roth's assertion that female characters in the novel are sexually open, as is demanded by the progression of the plot, yet "violently" outcasted, is demonstrated by the sexual aesthetic of the three vampire women because their sex appeal is described in animalistic terms.

The details of their physical appearance, including the "voluptuousness" of their body, create a sexual aesthetic. The following actions are examples of the sexual performance, that is, putting the aesthetic elements into a practice that aids in the routine

of seduction. Jonathan recalls, “The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet, and sent the same tingling through the nerves as her voice. . .. The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating…” (42). The voice, the tongue, the mouth, and the breath of the female suitor are extensions of the oral fixation present in *Dracula.* This fixation is an example of the sexual performance; furthermore, and more importantly, the female suitors “bending over” for Jonathan is a representation of the control women have over their own sexuality. Rather than Jonathan making the decisions throughout the sexual encounter, the suitors do, and do so by straddling him before moving to place themselves on top of him. Further down he states, “Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and feemed about to fasten on my throat...I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips...Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one’s flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer and nearer…” (43). The suitor’s head stops at Jonathan’s neck with the intention to bite him; however, her “lips went below” the “range” of his mouth which indicates that she was preparing him for fellatio. She is “[approaching]” the first clear moment of a penetrative sexual act before being immediately interrupted by Dracula. The interruption is metaphorical for the abrupt end to Jonathan’s internalized fantasies. In “Staking Salvation: The Reclamation of the Monstrous Female in *Dracula,*” Jennifer A. Swartz Levine argues, “Jonathan’s fascination quickly transforms into revulsion as the woman’s boldness increases. With each successively assertive move she makes, she becomes less and less humanized as ‘her lips’ become ‘the lips.’ Sexuality, then, is not associated with

real women but rather with debased aberrations of the category of woman" (347). It is not that Jonathan dehumanizes the vampire women just *because* they are women, but he does so because he is aroused; therefore, women should be punished for their own sexual expression rather than the behaviors of men. Moreover, the fairest vampire, the Mina replacement, perhaps, the fantastical projection of Jonathan's psyche, dominates the entire scene. The darker, more elusive vampires fade into the distance. The control the vampire women assert over Jonathan during their foursome, particularly this early on in the novel, is a significant example of Roth's point that female sexuality is demonized. That demonization leads to curiosity, critical assessment, and/or fetishization especially since vampires are mythical creatures that we are supposed to reserve a specific sexualized fear for.

In addition to the rendezvous with the three female vampires, the seeds of sexual exploration through nonmonogamy are already being planted in the female characters outside of the castle before Dracula even takes significant precedence. Lucy Westenra has three male suitors of her own, and her indecisiveness around each of them is a major detail in her characterization. Lucy is young, vivacious, an archetype of the Victorian feminine despite her dark hair, and the attention she receives from men is fueling for her. The Victorian feminine is a hegemonic aesthetic that demonstrates the British attachment to whiteness, patriarchy, and sexual violence. The Victorian feminine woman has pale skin, light hair, her virginity, and a desire to please the needs of the patriarchy. In a letter to Mina, Lucy divulges her excitement about having not just one, but three suitors at her attention. She exclaims, "Here am I, who shall be twenty in September, and yet I never

had a proposal till today... I have had three. Oh, Mina, I am so happy that I don't know what to do with myself. Don't tell any of the girls, or they would be getting all sorts of extravagant ideas and imagining themselves injured and slighted if in their very first day at home they did not get six at least. Some girls are so vain" (57-8). Her excitement about having three suitors is reflective of her flirtatious nature, but more importantly, from the moment she receives her three proposals on, her health deteriorates. The three vampire sisters have already physically engaged in non-monogamy, but Lucy has fantasized about such a prospect as having multiple men lust for her. Lucy is, at times, provocative, but unlike the three vampire women, Lucy is not as set in her sexual confidence which makes her an easy target for Dracula's influence. In an excerpt from Mina's journal, she details the first signs of Lucy's deterioration. She worriedly explains, "Lucy, although she is so well, has lately taken to her old habit of walking in her sleep. Her mother has spoken to me about it, and we have decided that I am to lock the door of our room every night" (72). It is interesting to note that the advice for Lucy's ailment is to be locked in a room, unconscious, so that she can continue to lock away her lackadaisical sexual identity rather than confronting her repression so she can be more self-assured in her sexual performance. The desire she has for sexual attention, as proven by her reaction to her multiple proposals, is essentially what leads to her downfall. It is through her illness and her stalking by Dracula that she must challenge her sexuality. Again, Lucy having three suitors is an act of non-monogamy because she entertains the attention of each man before deciding on a partner. She is already making minor steps towards sexual

exploration, but her illness continuously leads her to a more sexual situation because she becomes more vulnerable.

In transitioning from the obvious empowering aspects of non-monogamy, my argument that Mina and Lucy are in a nearly Sapphic friendship that is further strengthened by Dracula complicates matters because non-monogamy is often reduced to cheating, sex, or physical intimacy. To reinstate the purpose of non-monogamy in the novel, any activity that veers from marriage and obtaining marriage is non-monogamous. Harrison argues, "Heteronormative plotlines suppress and efface romantic love and friendships between same-sex couples...the significance of nonmarital relationships is diminished by virtue of the dominant plot [marriage]" (117). There has already been a Sapphic bond established in the novel: the vampire sisters. Non-monogamy is important to the conversation on the reverse erotic triangle because two characters have to be put into a situation where there is one person that two or more people put their attention and interest into. Mina and Lucy do not express a specific lust for Dracula or sexualize him over their own partners; however, his presence is what connects them together. Their relationship, and perhaps attraction to each other, revolves around Dracula's presence. Furthermore, everything that Dracula does is not a proposed romantic plotline of everyone fighting to be "the vampires" partner. The women do not lust after Dracula, but the men lust after the women who have been turned or influenced by Dracula. It is a calculated tactic meant to quite literally take the female characters away from their comfortable home, expectations, and community and challenge them in albeit dangerous ways.

To further elaborate, Mina and Lucy's relationship reflects a Sapphic bond that contributes to the sexually empowering themes in the novel because Mina's growing concern for Lucy becomes more about yearning than competing. Their bond revolves around the indescribable fear that Dracula's presence causes, but in their letters preceding their involvement with Dracula, Mina expresses a longing for Lucy. In a letter to Lucy, Mina states, "I am longing to be with you, and by the sea, where we can talk together freely and build our castles in the air" (55). When Lucy first shows signs of becoming ill, Mina journals, "Lucy walks more than ever, and each night I am awakened by her moving about the room. Fortunately, the weather is so hot that she cannot get cold; but still the anxiety and the perpetually being wakened is beginning to tell on me, and I am getting nervous and wakeful myself" (72). In both instances, Mina is longing for Lucy in specific ways that shift only after Dracula becomes a part of their relationship. Initially, Mina dreams of walking along the beach with Lucy where they can build their own castles. Now, Mina and Lucy certainly are walking side by side in their (forced) attempts to gain sexual control. Lucy is walking, she is entranced by Dracula who takes her to a completely different consciousness that exists within her but does not take precedence until she is ill. Mina wakes every time Lucy is walking because of her desire to care for and protect Lucy. Within Sapphic bonds, there is a need to offer subconscious protection of other women because of male violence. Lucy and Mina are approaching their own marriages, and it is not surprising that Mina is "nervous and wakeful" when Lucy begins walking (towards sexual independence) because this means that Lucy and Mina will soon be forced into hegemonic heterosexuality and their friendship will become less important

and possibly more frivolous. Mina fights Dracula not just because he is ravishing an entire town, but because he hurt *Lucy.* Mina fights for Lucy, when she could ultimately blame her for being so gullible to get involved in the first place. (I need more here but I think it's going to take another quote from the text and possibly a stronger source than Harrison)

Interestingly, non-monogamy exists to enable the vampire sisters, to allow Mina to long for and eventually be involved in saving Lucy, and, most notably, to allow the other characters and the reader to voyeuristically gaze at Lucy's seduction of Arthur and her eventual death. The entire novel goes into super high highs of action, broken recollections, and sexual turmoil. Dracula slowly takes over Lucy's body until she is sleepwalking, losing blood, and going unconscious. Arthur no longer becomes important because Lucy's body, and her life, have been taken over by Dracula as an attempt to free her from the bondage of marriage and promote maturity in her sexual expression. Lucy is dying, but the reader is tantalized by the foreign and dramatic nature of the situation. When she finally turns into a vampire and wakes up, she has a new found sexual freedom that heals her naiveté, resembles the sexual aesthetic of the vampire sisters, and strengthens the non-monogamy plot in the novel because everyone is gazing at Lucy's seduction of Arthur. In Dr. John Seward's diary, he describes finding Lucy's coffin empty. Dracula fed from and eventually captured and bit Lucy. When Lucy is found, all of her features are similar, yet carry a different energy. Mentioning her features is important because she certainly resembles the dominant vampire sister in her Englishness. Lucy is messily sexually empowered before Dracula, but now, she is on par

with the vampire sisters. They share an aesthetic. Dr. Seward describes, "When Lucy–I call the thing that was before us Lucy because it bore her shape–her eyes ranged over us. . ..As she looked, her eyes blazed with unholy light, and the face became wreathed with a voluptuous smile" (188). Lucy has been simultaneously empowered by her own sexuality, but removed from her own body; meaning, her now vampiric state is not as a woman or as a wife, but as a "thing" which is a mere reflection of what it means to shed sexual expectations in order to become a completely autonomous sexual being. Lucy approaches Arthur, her chosen suitor, "with a languorous, voluptuous grace," and begs, in front of other characters:

> "Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" There was something diabolically sweet in her tones-something of the tingling of glass when struck-which rang through the brains even of us who heard the words addressed to another. As for Arthur, he seemed under a spell; moving his hands from his face, he opened wide his arms. (188)

In this passage, Lucy is adamant about her need for intimacy because she is finally able to reach a higher sexual consciousness now that she is a vampire. Rather than daydreaming about the possibilities of multiple suitors, or marriage, or earning male attention, Lucy demands Arthur to come to her, physically, and come for her, sexually. She, like the fair vampire suitor arriving at Jonathan Harker's lap, takes control over her new found sexual prowess. Later on in the text, and in Dr. Seward's journal, he repeats Dracula, "'You think to baffle me, you-with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a

butcher's. You think you have left me without a place to rest; but I have more. My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine…'" (267). Having just argued that Lucy is sex and blood thirsty for Arthur, and that being a direct effect of Dracula's biting, I want to complicate the point by arguing that Dracula's words further prove the idea that sexual repression will continue to throb in the depths of one's self-consciousness. Let me be clear: if Dracula is a vessel rather than an object of desire, then his words can be contextualized as saying, "My prowess already has a hold on these puritan English women that cannot be controlled when they leave. You (men) will never compare to what I have given these women (sexual identity)." There is no place for repression to rest, but sexual confidence, once gained and practiced, will be difficult to push beneath the surface again. All of the women characters in the novel have been tainted, either directly or indirectly, by Dracula.

Finally, Lucy's death cannot be ignored because it is representative of the punishment enacted on women for being sexually empowered. More specifically, the reader has to confront their own sexual consciousness in these violent scenes. *Dracula* makes a significant contribution to the conversation on feminist art, how feminist art is performed, defined, and created. Peg Brand argues that, "The message of feminist art is twofold: first, a challenge to the well-known historical tradition of depictions of women by which male artists stereotype them as purely sexual, passive, or dependent; and second, the promotion of positive feminine attributes, accomplishments, and autonomy" (168). Brand provides an interesting perspective in which to view Lucy's death and the

violence towards women in *Dracula* as a whole. On one hand, feminist art often depicts women being violated in multiple ways; however, the metaphors buried within layers of aesthetic, characterization, and even the violence itself are empowering. On the other hand, many readers would argue that Lucy's death is merely a representation of how women are constantly put in sexual, emotional, or physical danger for gratuitous violence. The empowerment that comes from feminist art, particularly in the horror genre alongside *Dracula,* is found in recent Ari Aster films *Hereditary* and *Midsommar.* Lucy's murder is not empowering, but the turmoil she experienced preceding her death still leaves a lasting and important impression on the female reader because there is no denying that, up until this point, Lucy, Mina, and the vampire sisters showed genuine and tangible attempts to create a sexual identity. Those strides cannot be ignored, and, after all, Stoker was still a Victorian who had to make Victorian decisions regarding his characters for the sake of the reader's approval. Moreover, the fantasy that exists in *Dracula* could not exist in reality.

There have been several fantasies up until this point: three striking superhuman women seducing one engaged man for their own pleasure, Lucy having three suitors of her own, Mina longing for Lucy, and a mysterious vampire slowly taking control of a naive twenty-year old with her own developing sexual prowess. When Lucy is killed, that fantasy is killed. The female characters in the novel are not real, but death is often the most powerful act of freedom for female characters in art, especially horror, because it is sometimes the only way to alleviate trauma. When Lucy is killed, it is because she is perceived as a "threat," and Arthur runs a wooden stake through her heart. When faced

with the possibility that Dracula may heal her, they decapitate her and stuff garlic in her mouth. Lucy's desecrated body, and the fashion she was murdered in, are opportunities for the characters and the readers to understand the consequences women must face for being autonomous. Her heart being staked is a phallic metaphor for the pain women must experience during and after sex. She is forcibly penetrated through her heart, but it is not enough. Her being decapitated is a way to literally keep her from speaking, using her voice, or having her own thoughts. Finally, being stuffed with garlic in the mouth is a metaphor for sex because one of her orifices is forced open to be stuffed and gawked at. Dr. Seward, journaling after the death of Lucy, recalls the words of the woman who performed the last offices, "She makes a very beautiful corpse, sir. It's quite a privilege to attend on her. It's not too much to say that she will do credit to our establishment" (147). The words of the woman working on the body of Lucy are a perfect example of how obsessed the hegemonic culture is with "dead girls," or brutalized women. Lucy has been described as beautiful for over one hundred pages, yet there is a sense of appreciation for her beauty once she is dead. Stoker did not have Lucy killed off because of her own wrongdoing, he did so to demonstrate the entitlement we feel towards women and their sexual bodies.

To conclude, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a significant example of how women's sexual freedom is aestheticized, important for their interactions within their relationships and communities, and how the "dangers" of society are actually examples of an anti-patriarchal society. Non-monogamy is the backdrop for which all of the romantic, sexual, and/or emotional relationships function. The possibility of relationships and situations

that are *not* centered around marriage is ultimately the dominant theme in the novel. Fifty pages in, three voluptuous, whispering vampire sisters take control of the entire room in order to seduce Jonathan. He is uncomfortable with the situation, but his discomfort is a direct result of their sexual prowess. These three women are already powerful, beautiful, and free from hegemonic expectations since they live within the walls of Dracula's home (a breeding ground for sexual exploration, literally). Their aesthetic rings through minor details across each page of the text: voluptuous curves, an emphasis on hair, the redness of their lips, the tune of their song, their mouth, and the hauntingness in their eyes. Lucy embodies these characteristics once she turns into a vampire, also, and because she resembles the vampire sisters, she is able to have her own sexual performance. Mina longs for Lucy's friendship, her attention, and her approval, and does so in a selfless manner that directly counteracts the false competition that the marriage plot requires of same-sex friendship. Mina *admires* Lucy, and walks with her in all of her strife to protect her. When Lucy is murdered for her sexual prowess, her body is brutalized and objectified. She gained a threatening amount of sexual confidence, and had to be destroyed before she influenced anyone else, especially Mina. Lucy's death is a reminder of the violence of Victorian purity pressures and how fascinated, entitled, and fetishizing we can be with the corpse of a brutalized woman. Dracula's character is merely a driving force for intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict, but the idea that he himself is predatory rests on the assumption that sex is predatory. Bram Stoker's work acts as a major stepping stone for the heart of *Carmilla* and the voyeurism in *Villette,* and proves that monsters merely exist as mirrors for ourselves.

Chapter Three: "Please Don't Bite Your Tongue": Sapphic Sensuality as Feminine Bonds in J. Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla*

In an 1872 D. H. Friston illustration printed in the Victorian periodical, *The Dark Blue,* as an accompaniment to the publication of *Carmilla* itself, Carmilla, Laura, and Laura's father are depicted in an impassioned triangle that positions Laura as the highest point of desire. Her father, holding a sword, is clearly threatened by Carmilla's presence since she hovers over and attempts to reach (both metaphorically and physically) Laura. Laura's gown and the sheet that covers her are both thin and stretched across her chest to accentuate her breasts which suggests a sexualization of her body since her relationship with Carmilla becomes "impure" once the two engage sexually. Carmilla's skin, hair, and clothing is darker than Laura's, and her hair is much more coarse in the depicted texture. The details of the illustration mark the difference in the way the sexuality of both women is perceived by audiences and readers, but more importantly, Carmilla's father holding the sword is a strong representation of how patriarchy promotes and encourages fathers to subconsciously and consciously control the sexuality, relationships, and bodies of their daughters. In the article, "The Second Vampire: 'Filles Fatales' in J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*," Gabriella Jönsson argues, "Vampirized girls are the ultimate infantile fashioning of women in a society where men are compulsory 'family fathers.' 'Little women' are governable because they are sexually neutralized" (33). Friston's illustration situates *Carmilla* as a text laden with complicated conversations on power, predation, masculinity, and female sexuality. Moreover, LeFanu's novella proposes the idea that women can have intense romantic and sexual

bonds between each other that exist happily without the bondage of matrimony, masculinity, and parental monopoly.

In contrast to *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula,* an iteration of LeFanu's original artistry, he creates a male vampire around which the female characters center. The women characters in *Dracula* are constantly working violently *against* masculinity, and with fatal consequences. However, Laura and Carmilla are working *despite* and *regardless* of masculinity, which is evident in the ongoing conflict not between Laura and the men around her, but between Carmilla and the men around Laura, as depicted in the novella and the illustration. In *Carmilla,* the nineteen-year old protagonist, Laura, narrates the story of her picturesque life in Styria with her emotionally distant father. Her lonely upbringing prompts her father to arrange for Laura to have female company, which ultimately turns out to be Carmilla: the late Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, a distant ancestor. Laura once saw Carmilla in a hazy vision/dream as a child, and fixated on her until the time they finally met in person. Once Laura and Carmilla's relationship turns sexual, and once Carmilla is "outed" as a vampire, Laura's need for a companion is completely disregarded, and the hunt for Carmilla becomes the priority for Laura's father and his militarized acquaintances. Including Sapphism in my thesis, and including LeFanu's novella in general, accentuates the themes of sexual power, who has sexual power, and how sexual power is gained that ring through the entirety of my overall argument for my research. This chapter deviates from heteronormative narratives, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* where the themes of sexual empowerment are difficult to name and articulate, and challenges the reader to

question how sexual liberation functions between two women rather than the sole responsibility of one woman to find her voice through a relationship with another man. Regardless of the academic purposes for including *Carmilla,* Lesbian and Sapphic representation in literary conversations is significant because of the lack of healthy and accurate conversations around our identities, our art, and our history. J. Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* provides significant insight into the ways in which Lesbianism develops, thrives, and is expressed throughout the entirety of one's life starting at a young age. Sapphism is an important means for dismantling the hegemonic patriarchal and heteronormative society because the very nature of expending one's energy solely on protecting, listening to, caring for, and expressing extensive admiration for women is a subversive decision. Decentering men is a clear refusal to participate in any expectations of normalcy.

In order to establish any authority in my forthcoming argument on the sexual independence of the two female characters in *Carmilla,* I will define and explain my understanding of and experience with the term "Sapphic," which will be the overarching lens for examining the novella. The current definition of Sapphic is the experience of women feeling attraction towards other women, including bisexual, pansexual, and other sexually fluid women. However, I define Sapphic as a solely lesbian experience because to be Sapphic is to significantly limit interpersonal relationships and interactions with men. Previously in my introduction, I defined Sapphic as a Lesbian experience where the boundaries of masculinity do not exist. The loyalty to men, the approval that women seek from men, and the centering of men are examples of expectations that cisheteronormative

Victorian female characters must follow. For example, Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White* is not only thoroughly heteronormative, but exposes the gendered disparities in conversations of law and order since women were not entirely or enthusiastically granted the privilege of sitting in academic, recreational, or career circles. The previously listed examples of heteronormative expectations, such as staying loyal to men and their ideas, are irrelevant, dismissed, or usurped entirely under Sapphic relationships because the sheer nature of dedicating one's life to platonic and romantic relationships with women only is subversive, a reclamation of autonomy, and a commitment to actively "othering" oneself outside of the patriarchal sphere. Some examples of how literary (and real) Sapphic relationships dismiss masculinity are through conversations that do not include references to male love interests[1], the marriage plot, or the appeasement of parents, by rejecting and actively not relating to constructions of class, femininity, sexuality, race, age, and appearance, and through a continuous and genuine upheaval of the governing hegemony as a part of the ongoing nurturing, healing, and representation of female empowerment and connections. In her text *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory,* Julia Penelope describes the act of *being* a Lesbian as:

> A "turn of mind," a stance in the world that asks unpopular questions, that can be comfortable only when it confronts the sources of its discomfort, a frame of mind that refuses to accept what most people believe to be "true". . .just as being a living, breathing Lesbian exposes the lie of heterosexuality as "normal" and "natural," the Lesbian Perspective

[1] Alison Bechdel created the "Bechdel Test" as a way of evaluating female relationships in fiction. If two female characters have a conversation that does not mention a male friend or love interest, the work passes the "Bechdel Test."

> challenges every lie on which male society is founded...there's a large difference between "being heterosexual" and "being a Lesbian." "Being" heterosexual means conforming, living safely, if uncomfortably, within the limits established by men. "Being" a Lesbian means living marginally, often in secrecy, often shamefully, but always different, as "deviant." (39-41)

The act of choosing Lesbianism, which differs from having homoerotic fantasies or leanings, is a definitive political and social stance in which the one choosing such label is stating, "I will no longer allow men into my own sexual and romantic sphere, a threat in and of itself." To choose to be Sapphic is to say, "I will no longer allow the construction of patriarchy or men to dictate the way I conduct my life, and I will completely remove myself from any vision of such construction." Sapphism is the core value of LeFanu's entire novella because of the "threat" of freedom, confidence, and safety that Carmilla presents to Laura. In J. Sheridan LeFanu's novella *Carmilla*, Laura's rapidly growing relationship with sexual identity and sexual desire is heightened and promoted by the consistent appearance of Carmilla which is a direct threat to the expectations of Victorian heteronormativity and sexual secrecy. This threat prescribes a predatory identity onto Carmilla rather than viewing her as a healthy catalyst in which Laura can explore her own identity. A careful and close examination of the plot will reveal a significant dialogue about the rising tension around homosexuality at the time of LeFanu's publication, the importance of female partner and companionships in healing from patriarchal violence, and Queer liberation in order to validate the argument that Sapphism

is one of the main outlets for sexual freedom. The existing conversations around *Carmilla* focus heavily on psychology, the Gothic aesthetic (a significant detail in erotically coded works at the time), or the mere existence of the Queer relationship in general.

Before delving into the dialogue and sexual symbolism within the novella, I want to refer back to Penelope's text and her description and defense of the Lesbian experience which will, again, set the foundation for my analysis. She argues, "Regardless of how old we are when we decide to act on our self-knowledge, we say: 'I've always been a Lesbian.' Deciding to act on our emotional and sexual attractions to other wimmin is usually a long-drawn-out process of introspection and self-examination that can take years, because the social and emotional pressure surrounding us is so powerful and inescapable" (41). It is important to recognize this quotation from Penelope as relevant to *Carmilla* because Laura's experiences with Carmilla start within her psyche, within her dreams, and within the privacy of her bedroom when she is a child. Laura's first experience with Carmilla is substantial to her development as a sexually autonomous Lesbian because it starts as a secret, private, ever-dwelling erotic vision that requires Laura to think critically through such an experience. She also must reflect on the experiences alone. Laura opens the story by describing her "picturesque" life with her father, a retired, Austrian serviceman, in a Gothic castle that was once inhabited by the Karnstein family (7). She recalls the first time she sees Carmilla, in her dreams, at the age of six:

> The first occurrence in my existence, which produced a terrible impression upon my mind, which, in fact, never has been effaced, was one

> of the very earliest incidents of my life which I can recollect. Some people will think it so trifling that it should not be recorded here. . . 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 and delightfully soothed . . . I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly." (9-10)

The experience and emotions that Laura describes here are clearly conflicting as she admits that the situation "produced a terrible impression upon [her] mind," yet she "felt immediately and delightfully soothed" by Carmilla's presence and beauty. Laura's vision can be equated to the innate feeling of Lesbian desire that often begins in early childhood, and despite her being soothed, she states that, "The morning after I saw this apparition I was in a state of terror, and could not bear to be alone, daylight though it was, for a moment...but I was not comforted, for I knew the visit of the strange woman was *not* a dream; and I was *awfully* frightened" (11). At this point, Laura is not old enough to name what was frightening about Carmilla's presence aside from the physical reaction to having her breast punctured. The puncturing, though there is not proof such a bite happened, is an example of Carmilla's attempts to identify ("mark") Laura as Sapphic and a Lesbian. Carmilla's goal is that Laura will be completely liberated from her repression and her father, the man over her, through the subversiveness of their

relationship. In "'Thou Shalt Not Crave Thy Neighbor': *True Blood,* Abjection, and Otherness," Sabrina Boyer argues, "Frequently, our collective nightmares deal with the notion of difference or those who are separate...we often fear those who do not fit into our group. If these nightmares include a repetition of important cultural themes represented within the monster, he or she is now representative of many conflicting meanings and interpretations of these differences" (24).

Boyer's commentary supports the notion that the first vision scene is a detailed example of how recognizing and identifying Lesbianism is a much more "frightening" choice that requires painful self-awareness for Laura. Although Carmilla is a mirror for Laura's desires, and she is a reflection of Laura in Laura's dreams, like Boyer asserts, these sexual differences now have layered meanings. Laura immediately represses any comfort she felt from Carmilla's presence because of heterosexual indoctrination.

A superficial analysis centered solely on the "monster" elements of *Carmilla* would focus on the violence in Laura's vision, particularly since it ends in physical pain, and would reveal that Carmilla is invasive, predatory, stalkerish, unsafe, and sexually deviant. Renée Fox unpacks the message behind such outcasting by stating:

> Carmilla's choice to exercise her sexuality on another woman adds to this [dangerous woman narrative] because she becomes a threat both in her aggression and in her usurping of the masculine sexual place…[she] is imbued with all the domestically destabilizing power of the dominant female, all the socially transgressive power of the homosexual, and all the emasculating power of the sexual usurper." (113)

However, although Laura is a child, and although Carmilla arrives in an abrupt and looming manner, Carmilla only wants to care for Laura and introduce her to the idea that she could "be Lesbian" at an early age so that she does not have to doubt herself or her desires. It is in this reframing of the "monster" character that LeFanu begs the questions about Queer anxiety. In Havelock Ellis's 1900, second volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* where he describes homosexuality in women,, he claims, "And allied with this cause we have also to bear in mind the extreme ignorance and extreme reticence of women regarding any abnormal or even normal manifestation of their sexual life," which is a direct recognition that denying Victorian women sexual education is a widespread, rhetorically violent method of disempowerment (121). He further argues, "A woman may feel a high degree of sexual attraction for another woman without realizing that her affection is sexual, and when she does realize it she is nearly always very unwilling to reveal the nature of her intimate experience...and although the fact may be present to her that, by helping to reveal the nature of her abnormality, she may be helping to lighten the burden of it on other women" (121-22). Ellis's argument provides important insight into the Victorian interpretation of female homosexuality because Sapphism removes the burden of heteronormativity and masculinity. Carmilla's presence is doing exactly what Ellis claims: she is attached to Laura to "lighten the burden" of her homosexuality because Sapphism is meant to be felt and experienced amongst other women in an attempt to heal from patriarchal violence. Laura cannot speak about what she is experiencing quite yet, but she will eventually do so with Carmilla.

Once Laura meets Carmilla in person for the first time, she is finally able to name the feeling that her initial meeting with Carmilla evoked. The first vision is overwhelming, and Laura harbors shame and confusion about what happened for years. Ellis claims that women will not be able to communicate an accurate understanding of their sex lives, but Laura is already an exception in this argument because she *does* dwell on her encounter will Carmilla. For Laura to share her feelings about Carmilla before Carmilla arrives again is a subversive decision to try and take control of her own sexuality through communication. Furthermore, Carmilla's physicality is much more comfortable, confident, and secure compared to Laura's. Elizabeth Signorotti states, "Carmilla's effigy accentuates her physicality–as a contained image would not–and the threat she poses to male order. Her sexual power is totally unbound, freeing her to create her own systems of female kinship and to make the 'subversive and dangerous move' away from formal rules of male exchange" (615). Carmilla and Laura meeting and becoming friends for the first (real) time is an example of how LeFanu emphasizes the importance of female relationships as a major aspect of sexual development since Carmilla's physical form poses a different, more aesthetically focused threat. Both characters are able to better articulate and act on their own feelings because of the support they have for each other. The first literal encounter with Carmilla represents the physical, emotional, and mental "marking" of her desire for women. The second encounter is much more productive in terms of establishing platonic, Sapphic admiration.

Carmilla and Laura meet for the first time when they are both nineteen (so Laura believes), and when Carmilla arrives at the castle to be a companion for a lonely Laura,

she reveals that Laura's face is one she "saw in a dream" (27). The scene when Carmilla arrives is the first time that Carmilla has a corporeal presence, and she divulges to Laura that she saw her "golden hair and large blue eyes, and lips–[her] lips–and [her] as [she] is here" (28). She describes Laura's beauty, tells her that she trusts her and does not feel any fear around her for she is "pretty," and that she "feel[s] only that [she] has made [Laura's] acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to [her] intimacy" (28). Laura's characterization, or the perception another character has of her, is in aesthetic alignment with "virginal" imagery as seen before in *Dracula* because Laura is naive and often stumbles repeatedly on expressing the complicated experiences and emotions she is facing. Like Lucy, Laura is pretty, soft, but lacks self-awareness and is messy in her expressions because of her uncertainty. Laura reflects:

> 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...young people like, even love, on impulse. I was flattered by the evident, though as yet undeserved, fondness she showed me. I liked the confidence with which she at once received me. She was determined that we should be very near friends. (28-9)

It is within the phrasing of Laura's words that the reader can finally begin to understand that Carmilla's motives are clear, abrupt, and seemingly, rushed. Her motives, specifically, are to confide in Laura in order to "share the burden" of Lesbianism in

which they will both find comfort, but Carmilla really begins challenging Laura's perceptions of herself in these moments of meeting (122). Laura expresses three distinct and conflicting emotions: her sexual attraction towards Carmilla, the repulsion she feels about such attraction, and the hesitant yet appreciative welcoming of Carmilla as a platonic friend. By continuing to accept Carmilla as a friend, Laura is taking the interest she has in Carmilla outside of herself and making a specific and important choice to proceed with an eventual Sapphic bond. It is often through other women that women realize they have been victimized by the patriarchy, which is why feminine circles and communities are a threat to the patriarchy, and it is clear that Laura feels that an important part of her healing will be through her friendship with Carmilla because the reason Carmilla is even present is because of Laura's feelings of isolation.

Since Laura believes that her companion will be of great influence to her, she is able to better understand her own sexual and Lesbian identity because Carmilla promotes that growth in a "confident" manner. Up until Laura's acceptance of Carmilla, the reader has been introduced to Laura's characterization as virginal and repressed, reliant on her father's guidance, and longing for a companion. When Carmilla and Laura become closer, Laura begs Carmilla to provide information about Carmilla's past, her family, and her home. Carmilla does not reveal these details as an example of self-preservation and a sign that her background is complicated, possibly violent, and her refusal to identify with "family," "home," and a "background," is quite subversive since she is entirely, and once again, "confidently" on her own. She rejects the marriage and kin plot entirely to live a life where she engages sexually, romantically, and platonically with other women. During

Laura and Carmilla's first explicitly detailed, erotic recollection, where Laura is visited by Carmilla in her dreams, Laura shares:

> Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again: blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one forever." (34)

One implication of Carmilla's "ownership" over Laura is that it perpetuates the notion that Lesbian relationships are emotionally and physically intense as a result of sexual perversion or a lack of emotional boundaries: however, Laura and Carmilla are *both* emotionally and sexually invested at this point because the Sapphic nature of their relationship allows for a rapidly developing connection. Often, women characters are better and more comfortable at engaging with each other in a homosocial sense as opposed to the rigidity and oppressiveness of heterosexuality. As these sexual encounters occur, Laura falls ill with nightmares of a cat-like creature crawling into bed with her and biting her breast. The biting of the breast is a unique feature of *Carmilla* that feminizes and sexualizes the interaction in a way that the biting of the neck does not. By biting the breast, there is a maternal connection to breastfeeding and the importance of the breasts

for providing nourishment to a growing baby. When Carmilla bites Laura, she is conveying the message that Laura can provide nourishment for her in ways that men cannot. Furthermore, the biting of the neck, a genderless space, leaves a visible mark. Laura's bites and her breasts will be covered which "hides" her sexuality and Lesbianism. When Laura is bitten as a child, it is frightening and confusing. In "Not All Fangs Are Phallic: Female Film Vampires," James Craig Holte states, "The female vampire presented is also depicted as clearly outside the accepted norms of traditional Western culture: she is not only unnatural, undead, she is both a lesbian or bisexual and sexually aggressive. As a result, these female vampires, although depicted as sexually attractive and intelligent, are destroyed at the end of these films" (166). When Laura is bitten as an adult, it is (still) frightening, yet pleasurable, erotic, exciting, and secretive. As Holte argues, the female vampire is almost always Queer and, I would argue, not sexually aggressive, but sexually assured, confident, and risky in a way that exposes our own dangerous desires. The aspect of sexual growth and identity for Laura is already being shown in the novella because she starts as a timid teenager who spends her days quite alone and confused about her own existence and the space she inhabits. Through Carmilla's influence, she grows into someone who can name the overwhelming desire she has to understand Carmilla in order to better understand her, she enjoys Carmilla's seductive nature, and she remains sexually curious throughout the entire novella.

Laura's sexual curiosity, as is the case with Lucy and Arthur in *Dracula,* is halted when a man intervenes in her Lesbian relationship. When Laura is sifting through old, restored paintings, she finds a portrait of Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, dated 1698. The

woman in the portrait, pale skinned and dark haired, is revealed to be Carmilla. Women and girls across the town have been falling mysteriously ill and dying recently, and the epidemic is linked to Carmilla (Mircalla). The Karnsetin family has ancestral ties to Laura's family, and as Amy Leal argues, "By having Carmilla seduce only her own maternal Karnstein descendants, LeFanu makes vampirism, incest, and homosexuality resonate metaphorically as well as onomastically in his text: each involve a lusting for one's own kind" (38-9). Leal's argument is the answer to Laura's confusion about not being able to name her desires. Carmilla is able to communicate her desires because she is able to *name* them. Laura cannot name hers. Later in the text, "vampire expert" Baron Vordenburg is able to locate the hidden tomb of Carmilla, the vampire who killed his female ancestor and turned her into a vampire. When he opens the tomb, the body within it is covered in blood, dark, and slowly, barely breathing. He drives a stake through her heart, she screams, and her head is violently flown from her body. While Lucy Westenra is reduced to an object and gleaming, lifeless, sexualized, exploited corpse to be stared at by men, Carmilla is burned to ashes so that her body, and her Lesbianism, will be completely desecrated. The difference between two female characters is relevant because their post-death bodies are treated completely differently based on the punishment and the male gaze. Until this point, Laura has stated that her feelings, her experiences with Carmilla, have made her "a changed girl" (55). Laura stated that her feelings, however strange they may be, however *Sapphic* they may be, her "soul acquiesced in it" (56). Earlier than those statements, Carmilla professes her love for Laura by revealing, "I have been in love with no one, and never shall, unless it should be with you" (45). However,

once Carmilla is revealed to be a true vampire with centuries of victims, and once the men panic to stop Carmilla, Laura's feelings towards Carmilla completely shift to align with the heteronormative, hegemonic culture where men make decision for women and women follow and trust those decisions. Laura's shift is significant because it represents the very realistic experience of Queer women who engage, very clearly, in homoerotic fantasy and behavior, but later decide that heterosexuality will be easier. When time has passed after Carmilla's execution, Laura shares:

> [Vampires] present, in the grave, and when they show themselves in human society, the appearance of healthy life...how they escape from their graves and return to them for certain hours every day, without displacing the clay or leaving any trace of disturbance in the state of the coffin or the cerements, has always been admitted to be utterly inexplicable. The amphibious existence of the vampire is sustained by daily renewed slumber in the grave. Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigor of its waking existence. The vampire is prone to be fascinated with the engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons...in these cases [of romance], it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and **consent.** In ordinary [vampires] it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast. The vampire is, apparently, subject, in certain situations, to special conditions. (105).

To say that the entirety of Laura's revelation is disappointing would be an understatement, but it is, of course, unfair to project the happy ending of Lesbian harmony onto a late Victorian text. It is disappointing, for Queer readers, to watch a Lesbian relationship go horribly wrong and then have one of the Sapphic couple decide that, indeed, vampirism (Lesbianism) is dangerous. However, we must not discredit every kiss, every longing gaze, and every romantic proclamation of yearning that precedes Carmilla's murder. Laura is *still* a Lesbian, which is clear throughout the entirety of her final thoughts because she is significantly defensive and *specific* in the ways she condemns vampirism. The connection between Lesbianism and vampirism is that they both threaten the construction of "safety" that Laura resorts to after the trauma of watching Carmilla die. To condemn vampires is to condemn Lesbians and the "predatory threat" they pose. The rose-colored lenses of her yearning for Carmilla are interrupted when the men (her father, doctors, Vordenburg) loudly and violently abhor Carmilla.

The vehement disapproval of Carmilla by Laura's father and her community is a not-so-subtle message to Laura that Lesbianism is predatory and that she must not engage. She internalizes these messages for the first time, and the book ends on the note that she is disgusted by Carmilla. How unfair is it that the once mysterious, "confident" Lesbian is the first to be brutalized, and Laura can continue to live her life in the "lie" of "heterosexuality?" Again, though, Laura's defensive response to vampirism at the end is not at all a reflection of the power that Carmilla and Laura had through most of the novella. Messages about the rising tensions around homosexuality, the importance of Sapphic relationships in combatting the patriarchy, and Queer liberation are still and

especially present in the final two chapters because the experience of a passionate, first time, secret Lesbian affair followed by tragedy is a common trope in Queer media, such as Fernanda Cardoso's *Bloomington*, where the main character is a naive college freshmen who becomes romantically involved with her lesbian professor who is rumored to be a "vampire who feeds on her female students," and Katherine Brooks' *Loving Annabelle*. Lesbian films that feature tragedies or power imbalances feature plotlines similar to *Carmilla* are important because there is so much to be learned from the ways Lesbians internalize homophobia and grapple with the dominant culture. It is possible that LeFanu placed the "Conclusion" chapter in Laura's hands not just because she is the main character of her own story, but because the reader can get a specific insight into the challenges of security within Lesbian identity. Laura gained so much knowledge about herself through Carmilla, and that experience was overwhelming since Queerness cannot be public, cannot be celebrated, and that at all costs, she will hold onto the secret of her Sapphism long after Carmilla is gone. Perhaps Queer tragedy in literature has less to do with individual character choices and more to do with the ways readers can recognize and celebrate the exciting, romantic, and turbulent nature of discovering their own Queerness.

J. Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* is an example of the complexities of Sapphic relationships, the strength of feminine bonds, and sexual identity. When Carmilla first appears in Laura's dreams, Laura is comforted yet frightened by her appearance because this is vaguely the first Lesbian interaction Laura experiences. The dream is not sexually charged despite the puncture wound because Carmilla only arrives to prompt Laura's questioning of her sexuality. When she appears the second time, the two become good

friends after Laura has been isolated. Laura's quickly deepening infatuation with and reliance on Carmilla helps her to grow into her sexual orientation because Carmilla is living completely independently, she is secure in her love for Laura, and the bond that they have redirects Laura's attention away from her father. Laura's sexual freedom and confidence comes from being physically intimate with and bitten by Carmilla, and the dreams that she has even when Carmilla is physically present are a representation of her repressed, homoerotic fantasies. Their relationship is liberating because they are working together to completely disregard patriarchy rather than directly tear it down. Laura is always hesitant around Carmilla, but the fact still remains that their relationship was Sapphic, a symbol of Queer Victorian liberation from marriage and courtship, and an example of how female-centered relationships are an immediate threat to men regardless of their platonic or romantic nature. When Carmilla is killed, Laura painfully returns to the idea that "vampirism" (Lesbianism) is predatory, invasive, and violent. Her response is an excellent and accurate representation of how Lesbian women, especially in the beginning of their Queer journey, will resort to the "easiness" of heterosexuality. She details how vampires live in such a vexed way that it is clear, to the Queer reader, that she is hiding under the cloak of heterosexuality. Nevertheless, LeFanu challenges Victorian and contemporary readers to refocus their attention on Laura's psychological and sexual journey through a tumultuous Queer relationship that pays homage to the reckoning of feminine power, the otherness of Lesbianism, and, of course, the insidiousness of internalized homophobia, Lesbophobia, and misogyny. *Carmilla* fits within the context of my thesis because both of the young adult, female characters in the

novel struggle through the tumultuous discovery of sexual prowess, sexual confidence, and sexual identity in similar ways to Lucy Westenra, Mina Murray, Lucy Snowe, and other femininely coded characters. The ensuing chapter will venture away from metaphorical monsters to tackle the looming discomfort/delight of voyeurism, secrecy, and sexuality in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette.*

Chapter Four: "I Appreciate the Way You Watch Me": Boundaries in Admiration and Controlled Voyeurism in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

In Bram Stoker's 1897 text, *Dracula,* and J. Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 text, *Carmilla,* the communication between the characters, and the communication between the characters and the reader, is clear and honest in order to capture as many if not all of the details of each conversation and scene. When reading Stoker and LeFanu's texts, the reader can make the informed assumption that the narrator(s) is/are not withholding pertinent information that could change the course of the characters or the plot. However, in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,* the narrator, Lucy Snowe, willingly withholds details, information, and thoughts from the reader. Lucy's withholding of information complicates the relationship the reader has with her character because she becomes unreliable, but ultimately, her decision to withhold information is rooted in her desire for control over her voice and expression. Lucy Snowe's purposeful silence and refusal to provide more information to the reader is inconvenient, but exists as a powerful feminist statement on women characters/writer's right to privacy: private emotions, private fantasies, and private memories. Lucy does not divulge the important information that can be found in letters or journals, as Stoker does in *Dracula,* but she forces the reader to put the pieces together with details of characters and conversations she observes because it takes the focus away from herself. *Villette* explores female sexual empowerment in specific and conflicting ways that command the reader's attention to conversations on voyeurism and voice. Lucy controls the narrative entirely by only allowing the reader and other characters information she herself finds important rather than carelessly sharing the

intimate details of her own thought processes that she works so hard to preserve. Lucy's sexual empowerment comes from her ability to gain control over her own narrative voice since she struggles with repression and forming her own identity, and her sexual empowerment also comes from her "watching" of others. Lucy Snowe's character raises important questions about platonic boundaries and the sexual limits of voyeurism.

Brontë's novel begins with Lucy Snowe as the fourteen year old protagonist who lives with her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, and she first observes the relationships between Mrs. Bretton's son, John Graham Bretton, and Paulina Home. After leaving Mrs. Bretton's home and experiencing a family tragedy that is not revealed, Lucy, now twenty-three, arrives in Belgium to be a nanny at Madame Beck's boarding school for girls. The staff and students are constantly surveilled by each other, yet Lucy thrives in the school environment despite her past with Mrs. Bretton's overbearing nature. Over the course of the novel, Lucy watches a variety of relationships including John Bretton's relationship with coquette Ginevra Fanshawe, M. Paul Emanuel's relationship with Madame Beck, gains insight into her own view of relationships through her infatuation with Paul Emanuel, and has to confront her own sexual desires through the cracks in her religious devotion when she is repeatedly visited by the potential ghost of a nun who once lived at the boarding school but broke her vow of chastity.

Considering the theme of youth and unreliability in the novel, a review of literature reveals that much of the dominant criticism on *Villette* focuses heavily on Lucy's reliability as a narrator, her manipulative behaviors, and the religious differences between she and M. Paul. However, my analysis of Lucy's character suggests that instead

of her unreliability and manipulative behaviors coming from a specifically malicious or intentional place, I argue that Lucy struggles with her own identity as a woman and behaves flippantly as a result of her internal struggle with herself. She finds pleasure in watching others because she is able to learn who she should or could be since she struggles with expressing a clear sense of identity. However, in the 1997 article, "The Two Faces of Lucy Snowe: A Study on Deviant Behavior," Beverly Forsyth argues, "*Villette* is a revealing glimpse into social and sexual deviancies subtly interwoven throughout the text that create subtext of repressed sexuality, voyeurism, and sadomasochistic behavior. These deviant tendencies give the modern reader a peek into the darker nature of female Gothic" (17). Forsyth further argues, "As a result of [sexual] repression, a pattern of sadomasochistic behavior is established consistently throughout Lucy's life. Lucy's repression of information indicates sadistic tendencies" (18). Forsyth's argument that Lucy is sexually repressed and takes an interest in voyeurism that potentially becomes more sexually driven is fascinating and textually supported, but her point about sadomasochism is stated and argued in a way that makes Lucy seem emotionally violent and fixated on the perversions of sexual, emotional, or mental manipulation. Lucy is twenty-three and inexperienced, and her efforts to gain control, so she can feel more secure in herself, are reflective of her lack of self-awareness because of how uncomfortable or offensive some of her reactions may be. In Katherine J. Kim's article, "Corpse Hoarding: Control and the Female Body in 'Bluebeard,' 'Schalken the Painter,' and *Villette,"* she interestingly paints Lucy as a victim of a Bluebeard-esque dynamic between herself and M. Paul. Forsyth and Kim adequately illuminate the

complex and sometimes concerning relationship between Lucy and M. Paul, but situating Lucy on a binary of sexual deviant or victim whose body and space has been invaded by an overseeing man is a great disservice to her own internal desire to be free from the waif performances of femininity. Lucy enjoys being an observer at all times, and being observed when she can gain temporary power, but it seems that Lucy cannot express or name these pleasures.

Lucy is unable to assert an interest in any sexual fixations, but repeated acts of voyeurism demonstrate a developing internal sexual landscape even when her acts of voyeurism are not immediately erotic. Voyeurism, for the context of Lucy's motivations, refers to the ongoing and often subconscious desire to "watch" or "catch" others in various intimate acts, without their knowledge, including: private conversations between two or more characters, prying for information about other characters, or watching other characters while they (believe) they are alone. Voyeurism also includes watching other characters, with or without their consent, while they engage in sexual acts of intimacy, but Lucy's voyeurism does not become overtly sexual until her relationship with M. Paul deepens. Furthermore, Lucy also enjoys being watched as much as she enjoys watching because she gains power by holding the attention of other characters.

Lucy Snowe is an example of a Victorian female character who carefully chooses where and when to use her voice, which illuminates the notion that she feels intrinsically and intimately tied to her own shadow which motivates her to protect who "sees" and "knows" her. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* they argue:

> The very erratic way Lucy tells the story of becoming the author of her own life illustrates how Brontë produces not a literary object but a literature of consciousness. Just as Brontë has become Lucy Snowe for the writing of *Villette,* just as Lucy has become all of her characters, we submit to the spell of the novel, to the sepulchral voice relating truths of the dead revivified by the necromancy of the imagination. Brontë rejects not only the confining images conferred on women by patriarchal art, but the implicitly coercive nature of that art. (175)

Gilbert and Gubar connect Lucy to her author, Brontë, since they both act as examples of women who use the withholding of details and/or writing to assert boundaries that women so often could not assert in the Victorian era. Lucy Snowe is sexually empowered through the control she has over the presentation of her thoughts, voice, and therefore her body by denying the reader important information, such as the fact that John Bretton is also "Dr. John." Interestingly, there is significant difficulty determining who Lucy Snowe is or how she became who she is because there is little information provided at any point in the novel that details her childhood. How little the reader knows about Lucy is a rhetorical decision on her part for two main reasons: she enjoys relishing in how much she can and cannot tell us because withholding information gives her power and/or her skillfulness in secrecy will prepare her for later, overtly sexual motivations (such as her fixation on voyeurism that only becomes mildly erotic with M. Paul enters). When Lucy speaks of her childhood once she states, "Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, and when I thought of past days, I could feel"

(85). She never reveals much about her childhood, but her words in this particular quotation reveal a partial recognition of her repression since she follows by saying, "About the present, it was better to be stoical…" (85). She describes the house in Bretton, where her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, resides, as having "large peaceful rooms, the well-arranged furniture, the clear wide windows, the balcony outside, looking down on a fine antique street…," a description focused solely on the spaciousness, the tidiness, and the ability to have a view so as to give Lucy emotional, physical, and creative control (3). Lucy can "see" the outside world from this room since she relies heavily on modeled behavior in the following pages of the story.

One example from the novel of Lucy's withholding information is when, in one of the biggest revelations in the novel, Lucy hides the fact that the English doctor who frequently visits the boarding school is actually John Bretton, Mrs. Bretton's son, from the reader although she already knows this information when she first meets him. Lucy described, "I noticed that he spoke French well, he spoke English better; he had, too, an English complexion, eyes, and form. I noticed more" (76). While Lucy is always watching, noticing, and observing, and telling the reader her observations, she is also withholding pertinent information about the characters that significantly shifts the perception of the reader. She teases the reader by just barely letting the reader into her world because she gains empowerment by being able to control the narratives of the people around her especially as someone who is very young, repressed, and quiet. She gains pleasure by being able to control her expression and her divulgence. In "The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,*" Kristen Pond describes Lucy's silence and

refusal to share information as, "a sign of both her disempowerment and her empowerment; her silence is at once a pathological product of her repression, a response to an experience of trauma, and the means to achieving a cohesive self" (771). Lucy's choice to withhold information is conflicting for the reader because the reader is unable to observe *with* her by being present in the same moment, but Lucy's secrecy ultimately empowers her by letting her control how her life and story is told since patriarchy dictates that women should be agreeable and open to their own detriment. Women characters are often significantly underdeveloped; therefore, Lucy's ability to control her audience is rooted in her quest for female identity. If repression is something Lucy is used to as a way of protecting herself, as is seen with the women in *Dracula* and *Carmilla,* then it makes perfect sense that she would keep information from the reader as a way of setting her own boundaries.

In further examples from the novel, Lucy engages in being the object of voyeurism which gives her a type of power that she ultimately mismanages. Lucy acts ruthlessly towards her students in multiple ways. In one scene, she reflects on one of the first times she teaches the all-female students and recalls, "I could, in English, have rolled out readily phrases stigmatizing their proceedings and such proceedings deserved to be stigmatized; and then with some sarcasm, flavored with contemptuous bitterness for the ringleaders, and relieved with easy banter...it seemed to me that one might possibly get command over this wild herd, and bring them into training, at least" (64). Lucy then walks up to a student she deems "vicious," picks up the student's composition book, reads the writing she regards as "stupid," and tears the pages out in front of said student.

She immediately makes note of the student reactions which include, “one girl alone, quiet in the background, perverse in the riot with undiminished energy” (64). The text suggests that Lucy commits such a heinous act and in front of the other students because she struggles with her identity, which means she does not have a solid command on who she is or what she wants. She wants to have control over herself and her perception in order to feel whole. To analyze the composition scene more deeply, Lucy’s behavior is an example of voyeurism. In Joseph Litvak’s article “Charlotte Brontë and the Scene of Instruction: Authority and Subversion in *Villette,*” he argues, “When the governess becomes a teacher, she learns the contradiction embodied by many an actor, professional, or otherwise–the contradiction between vulnerable self-presentation and necessary self-concealment” (478). Litvak adequately addresses the main issue with Lucy’s mismanagement of power: it is because she feels vulnerable in the moment and resorts to sadistic defensiveness. She is clearly using sadistic means through sarcasm, which already makes student characters defensive, she picks up a piece of student property most likely filled with personal writing (from a female student), and destroys the pages when the work is not deemed strong enough for her academic tastes. Furthermore, she immediately looks around the room to observe other students observing herself which is a voyeuristic behavior. In “Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette,*” Margaret L. Shaw states, “In fact, much of what motivates Lucy’s actions is the desire to regulate for herself the observations of others. In particular, the really private interior must be protected from the ‘common gaze’” (817). Shaw provides an interesting framework in which to characterize Lucy in the composition scene because Lucy literally exerts an

inappropriate amount of clumsy power by using passive aggressive sarcasm in order to talk down to the students. For Lucy, the classroom moment is empowering because she can execute the aesthetic of being a powerful teacher through means of fear because it protects herself, it gives her a specific kind of gendered power, and she finds fulfillment in being "watched" in her acting out. The result of Lucy's power exertions is the students gazing at her, a way she has gained their control, and now she is being *seen.* She watches everyone watch her because she gains a personal sense of control by watching/being watched. Even telling the reader that she thought the student's work was "stupid" is a way of Lucy actively trying to gain control over a person, a place, and an internal monologue that she cannot decipher appropriately and refuses to allow the reader to make any assumptions about her. Her sexual repression makes her ability to be self-aware about the harmful and toxic behaviors she exhibits increasingly difficult; moreover, she can victimize herself if she flaunts her immaturity and sexual ignorance. Lucy does not entirely see her own wrongdoings because of her lack of self-awareness. Everything Lucy does is, as Shaw argues, a method of controlling her own madness.

In a more overtly sexual instance of voyeurism, Lucy must replace the character of the rake in the school play which means that she will be playing the love interest of the coquette character–played by Ginevra Fanshawe, the woman John Bretton is pursuing. Lucy actually has no genuine desire to fill the role in the play, but does so even though she knows it will cause her pain. The example of Lucy in the classroom put her in a major position of power where she reacted out of personal insecurity using her still-developing personal voice in order to be gazed at, but her taking on the play is a much

more erotically-coded example of voyeurism especially since her love interest, literature teacher M. Paul Emanuel, is the one who sends and locks her in a cramped, hot, old attic to rehearse her lines for the show where he listens outside the door (without her knowledge). Previously in the novel, Lucy has made significant judgements about others and abused her power within the classroom. She is significantly more concerned with having power over women (reading their composition) in an emotionally withdrawn and absent minded way that ultimately harms them, but she does specifically enjoy the gaze of M. Paul. Lucy's approach is an example of clear internalized misogyny where she is uncomfortable with or unsure of her own femininity and projects that onto other women while maintaining a submissive (feminine) attitude towards men. Toni Wein argues in "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,"* "Only women who mask their masculine intelligence with feminine modesty receive approbation. The reward to women for such complicitous compliance is to become commodified and hence substitutable" (739). Wein's point becomes important when Lucy begrudgingly performs a few of the lines in front of M. Paul. She states, "I did my best–which was bad, I know: it provoked M. Paul; he fumed. Putting both hands to the work, I endeavored to do better than my best; I presume he gave me credit for good intentions; he professed to be partially content" (104). As Wein argued, Lucy actively wants to work harder to be better for M. Paul. She wants M. Paul to be constantly watching the way that she "moves" through challenging tasks that she resentfully completes. She is able to garner M. Paul's affection by only letting him watch her since she her grip on her vulnerability and emotional openness is so firm. He responds, "You must withdraw: you must be alone to learn this. Come with me"

(104). Not only does he raise his voice and perform a subtly violent masculinity, but Lucy fetishizes his teaching profession by equating his frustrations with her sloppily rehearsing her lines to her failure to be a good "student" and "work harder" mainly for him. Furthermore, the attic is the opposite of the room is Mrs. Bretton's home, and the setting plays a significant role in the eroticism of the scene because Lucy is "forced" to stay there uncomfortably despite her own reservations. Everything about the room is the opposite of what Lucy would prefer. When the time of the play comes, Ginevra and Lucy, in character, have a sexual encounter on stage, in front of John Bretton. While the encounter is not graphic or even detailed greatly, merely having John watch Lucy play the role of Ginevra's lover in a romantic and sexual sense is voyeurism particularly for John, but excitingly (to Lucy) for everyone else, also. Lucy has control over Ginevra and John here without them realizing or consenting to her triangulation.

Another aspect of the play scene is that it acts as another example of Lucy's voyeuristic interests becoming increasingly erotically centered as she develops into her own sexual identity. While voyeurism is technically harmless for the one interested since it is solely based around watching and observing others in sexual acts rather than engaging, there are concerns that still require discussing. If John and Ginevra are unaware of the erotic game that Lucy has in her head, then the fetish engagement is technically nonconsensual since two out of three people are completely unaware of the sexualization of the situation even if that sexualization is between Lucy and the reader. However, she is not the only character trying to be under surveillance and surveilling others. M. Paul is honest about his watching of Lucy, which she is attracted to, when he

admits, "You need watching, and watching over...and it is well for you that I see this, and discharge both duties. I watch you and others pretty closely, pretty constantly, nearer and oftener than you or they think" (287). Lucy is not as honest about her voyeuristic tendencies as M. Paul is, as argued by Joseph A. Boone in his article "Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative,'" where he states:

> In this world where everybody constantly watches everybody else, the greatest moments of private gratification, it would seem, involve violating the privacy of others...this is a transaction in which the spy, when not busily prying into somebody else's secrets, openly confesses his own: making sure that those spied-upon know that the spying eye has penetrated their inmost secrets becomes a perverse way of consolidating and displaying one's superior powers. (20)

Boone's critiques of *Villette* illustrate an important point about the connection between identity and voyeurism because the penetrable spying that Boone describes is actually a great example of identity insecurity. The energy being placed into invading the spaces of others, in specific reference to M. Paul, is about gaining power over others in order to claim intimidation as an identity. Watching and waiting for the moves of others is a way to soak in the behaviors and actions of those people in order to have a sense of self. I believe this is true for both Lucy and M. Paul, but Lucy is much more casual in her voyeurism and much more secretive. What Lucy is thinking is between the reader and herself because she enjoys being the outsider, but M. Paul enjoys being the oppressor and uses his fetish for mild sadism for observation in order to abuse and control other women.

M. Paul and Lucy reveal the differences in voyeuristic exploration that are certainly rooted in patriarchy, but Lucy is not the perpetrator of sexual violence for her fixation on voyeurism. Voyeurism is freeing for Lucy, but a manipulative necessity for M. Paul.

The differences in the way M. Paul Emanuel and Lucy Snowe express their voyeuristic traits are not only different in a patriarchal sense, but different in that they both complement each other's sexual interests to create one of the most obvious dominant/submissive couples in Victorian literature alongside Heathcliffe and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Lucy is a passive female character who has an overwhelming body of knowledge about other people that she gained through listening to and watching them, which the reader figures out themselves although Lucy does not shy away from casually admitting that she surveils others, including her employer. In the final and most overtly erotic scene in the novel, M. Paul finds a depraved sense of *excitement* when he has the opportunity to tell Lucy that he watches her. Lucy describes the state of her desk, "Now I knew, I had long known, that that hand of M. Emanuel's was on the most intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own. The fact was not dubious, nor did he wish it to be so: he left signs of each visit palpable and unmistakable" (271). In the scene where Lucy describes her desk, the reader becomes aware that M. Paul has been going through the contents of her desk, her writing, and her belongings seemingly without her permission. Lucy shows very little concern for how invasive M. Paul's gestures are which suggests that she finds pleasure in being watched in these borderline violent (lack of clear consent) ways. When M. Paul is caught smoking a cigar

at Lucy's desk, he questions, "I thought you were gone into town with the other teachers...It is well you are not. Do you think I care for being caught? Not I. I often visit your desk" (272). In making these comments, M. Paul immediately puts Lucy in a position where he has control over her. She is difficult to figure out–her identity is not shaped and she is not entirely assertive but wants M. Pauls' attention–and searching through the contents of Lucy's desk is a way that he can learn about and through her rather than communicating with her because he knows intrinsically that she will submit to what he does because she is enticed. He does not care about being caught because being caught by her fuels his voyeur ego. Lucy is happy that she was able to catch him so that she could watch him without his knowledge. Lucy and M. Paul's constant touching of and interference with Lucy's desk is a metaphor for sexual arousal because they have yet to engage in any physical act, but the communication with the intimacy of the desk and its contents is an invitation for sex. Lucy and M. Paul are devoutly religious, but the desk acts as a way for them to be intimate without breaching chastity (like the nun whose ghost lingers in the school). However, despite the lack of direct sexual communication, Lucy is still able to grow through her experiences with M. Paul because she learns to open up to others without being so repressed, and M. Paul becomes less strict and fixated on masculinity. Lucy's becoming more comfortable through these questionable sexual experiences is exactly what leads her to sexual confidence as seen in her growing trust in and admiration for M. Paul.

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* works within the similar frameworks of *Dracula* and *Carmilla* where sexual curiosity, voicelessness, an unsure sense of self, and

repression are overarching experiences amongst the female characters. However, through increasingly challenging situations, Lucy finds her voice more and more in conversations with M. Paul and the students she oversees. Lucy is difficult because she has no stable sense of herself until the end of the novel, but the general assumptions about her passiveness and flippant cruelty are rooted in her insecurities and lack of concrete place as a woman. She struggles with issues of internalized misogyny because she actively tries to assert control over the girls who attend the boarding school. However, she truly just wants to be *seen* and goes to lengths, such as tearing up the composition pages, that are violent in order to feel acknowledged. She enjoys the relationship that she has with M. Paul because they both enjoy, to some extent, the mutual voyeuristic experience where they are able to have surveillance over each other. The more seen that Lucy feels seen through her relationship with M. Paul, the more that she opens up to him as a confidant and friend. By recognizing Lucy's need for space and her own voice, M. Paul is able to contribute to Lucy's sexual development since she can channel her energy into her relationship and not through invasive voyeuristic means even if M. Paul is not always an ideal partner. Overall, Lucy Snowe is an excellent example of a Victorian female character that is able to create boundaries and distance between her and other characters by being withdrawn and silent, but her internal landscape suggests that she has a colorful and detailed mental and emotional world that demonstrates her restlessness in her age, sex, and maturity. She observes others to learn about herself, but this voyeurism ultimately leads to her being empowered and appropriately assertive. In the beginning of the novel, Lucy reveals that she has a vast internal landscape, but is timid to share herself

with others. By the end of the novel, Lucy has an intense emotional and romantic attraction to M. Paul where she is able to bond with him through learning to trust him to respect and admire her, trust herself to let another person see who she is, and she grows to trust the relationships she develops after M. Paul because of each experience of growth–such as the composition or desk scene–to become an example of the messiness and difficulty of self-development.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Ultimately, a feminist approach to the female characters in Victorian literature suggests that a long developing patriarchal bias leads to the inherent misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the lives of women, and it is within this misrepresentation and misunderstanding that expectations of women are set. An example of a misrepresented, Victorian female character is the unnamed governess from Henry James' *Turn of the Screw.* The governess' identity is centered in being a caregiver, and throughout the novel, she is endlessly manipulated by those around her into believing that her experiences and emotions are either not real or not important so that she will respond "hysterically" by the end of the novel. Furthermore, and most importantly, patriarchal bias has certainly not escaped nor been excluded from the creation of the characters in the works of Bram Stoker, J. Sheridan LeFanu, or Charlotte Brontë. However, despite any cultural limitations that challenge the voices of women, each author exemplifies the brief and the complicated shimmers of sexual autonomy that the female characters assert. In *Dracula*, *Carmilla,* and *Villette,* the female characters are examples of women who are striving for and come to find their own voice, sexual autonomy, and feminine empowerment through tests of their emotional, mental, and physical strength. The female characters from these novels–Lucy Westenra, Mina Harker, Carmilla, Laura, Lucy Snowe, and Ginevra Fanshawe–assert their own sexual autonomy by testing the boundaries of promiscuity, ancestral and familial expectations, queerness, voyeurism, and consent at the very real threat of their safety. The journey the female characters make towards sexual empowerment very rarely includes descriptions of their role within sexual acts. Rather,

sexual empowerment refers to the centering of one's own being, one's own *pleasure,* and their power when navigating through connections with the other characters. Stoker, LeFanu, and Brontë's main heroines completely denounce the label of woman as *victim* and reimagine their role as women as *empowered*. Consequently, the following conclusion will focus specifically on the importance of continuing to broaden the scope of how feminist theory elevates and recognizes the strengths of female characters in Victorian literature, the application of feminist theory in contemporary conversations on Victorian literature, and will further elaborate on the future of positive depictions/receptions of sexual empowerment and feminism within cultural conversations.

In twentieth-century scholarship on Victorian female characters, feminist theory is often synonymous with being anti-femininity rather than anti-oppression. Anti-femininity suggests that the creation of female characters who adhere to typical feminine aesthetics or performances is inherently violent, and that to strip female characters of their femininity in effort to create gender neutrality is the goal of feminism. Because of the misunderstandings on the use of feminist theory, the line between sexual empowerment and sexual violence is difficult to draw since women characters who adhere to patriarchy are viewed as "not feminist" and women who survive the novel, do not succumb to marriage, and who directly express their boundaries with male characters are regarded as "feminist." However, the second-wave feminist approach to literature using the binary between "good feminist" characters or "bad feminist" characters has created a misjudgment on the purpose of those characters that rings through a substantive amount

of literary criticism on Victorian novels. For example, in her 1971 article on Catharine's identification with and dependence on her immature relationship with Heathcliffe in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, "The Double Vision of 'Wuthering Heights': A Clarifying View of Female Development," Helene Moglen argues, "For Catherine the fragmentation is expressed in the necessity of her choice between Heathcliff and Edgar– two parts of herself: one, a reality; the other, an aspiration" (395). Moglen does seem to be concerned that Catherine's still developing psyche is concerned almost entirely with choosing a partner, but a thorough, contemporary feminist analysis would significantly elaborate on the fact that Catherine has her own identity that must be described and noted *separately* from her relationships with men even if the male characters dominate her narrative. By broadening the scope of feminist theory, as is happening within modern academic classrooms, Catherine would be more recognized for her own strengths and assertions of power amidst the trauma. Female characters can have tragic endings, follow the cisheteronormative outcome, and can be problematic people who make flawed decisions and *still* be worthy of admiration for the strides they do make throughout the course of the text. Broadening the scope of feminist theory beyond labeling women characters as victims will shift the narrative on how readers connect with the text.

Another example of how important expanding our understanding of feminist theory within the Victorian literary context is the assumption that in order to *be* feminist or benefit from feminism, one must be completely unsexed from femininity, marriage, or any other expectation that can result in entrapment. For example, Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders argue in their article, "The Rebel, The Lady, and the 'Anti': Femininity,

Anti-Feminism, and the Victorian Woman Writer," "What united feminist and anti-feminist writing of the Victorian period is its central concern with questions of femininity, each side laying claim to an 'authentic' as opposed to the other camp's 'artificial,' flawed, corrupted femininity" (298). Here, Heilmann and Sanders make an important point about the challenges of defining feminism, or feminist writing, because femininity is a creation by the patriarchy, but the identity of being a woman is completely autonomous and complex. Lucy Westenra is a noteworthy example of a woman character who, by all evidence provided about her relationship with Arthur and through all accounts of violence, is oppressed by the patriarchy in ways that uphold the importance of her performative femininity. However, she chooses her own partner out of three suitors, she chooses to follow the lead of Dracula, and when she becomes a vampire, she hones in on her own sexuality much more extravagantly since her appearance becomes more revealing, she develops a new found sex appeal, and she initiates sexual contact with Arthur which is certainly subversive for a female Victorian character. By continuously changing and developing the landscape for feminist theory, academics can analyze Lucy Westenra as a well-rounded female character in the midst of a growing curiosity about sexuality who is eventually brutalized by patriarchal violence without reducing her to a helpless victim. Carmilla, also, demonstrates modern feminist values because she exists without any attachment to men, she actively and subversively pursues women, and she challenges Laura's self-perception despite being murdered by Laura's father and his friends at the end of the story. Finally, Lucy Snowe shares the same growing curiosity about sexuality that challenges her withdrawn nature, and the

challenges she faces during her growth in the novel is becoming more of a concern to feminist critics than the healthiness and safety of her relationship with M. Paul.

In contemporary conversations on the application of feminist theory to Victorian literature within the academic sphere, there is a notable shift in the way students perceive the cultural context of the literature because students are becoming increasingly interested in the relatability of and purpose Victorian literature has in twenty-first century culture. Interrogating the "otherness" of the characters in Victorian literature is of greater importance at this current moment because the voices of sex workers, queer and transgender youth, Black women, poor women, toxic and violent women, and mentally ill women have been repressed. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberle Crenshaw uses her coined term "intersectionality" to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multidimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (1244). Although the term has since been used to refer to the intersection of one's identities and how that intersection exists within the sociocultural sphere, I believe the shifting literary classroom has positively taken a heightened interest in the prioritization of character representation because of such intersectionality. By interrogating the "othered" characters in Victorian literature that represent us, we are able to completely recenter the focus of feminist theory to reflect the inclusion of the diverse, vast, and valid experiences of women. Feminist movements and theories are much more accessible through social media, and this accessibility creates a more open dialogue about approaches to liberation. There is no longer a desire to merely "suggest" that a text is rampant with sexual

behavior, sexual habits, queer innuendos and metaphors, pro-sex work politics, or that villainous women are not, indeed, victims. There is, however, a deepening desire to assert that perhaps the Victorian literature listed in the esteemed literary canon has always told elaborate stories about complicated female characters with unique sexual fixations, including being one of the three mistresses of a vampire, and that the uncomfortable details of figuring one's sexual performance cannot be reduced to "victim" and "feminist." The lively, sexual, queer inclusive culture that is palpable within the twenty-first century Western culture was silently active in Victorian England. To revisit the works of Stoker, LeFanu, and Brontë with a present-day sense of intersectionality is to recognize that Victorian women were silenced, that the characters in these novels are projections of the repressive silence, and that the different voices we give these works that have been revered for centuries speaks to how deeply we are willing to listen to the same story if we can see ourselves in it.

Intriguingly, contemporary academics and students are moving in the direction of multimodal methods of understanding literature. For example, there is a growing interest in analyzing Stoker's 1897 text of *Dracula* and the 1992 film version of the same name congruently. In another, most recent example, LeFanu's 1872 text of *Carmilla* was made into a 2019 film written and directed by Emily Harris. Tom Whalen argues in "Romancing Film: Images of *Dracula,*" "Dracula, this creature of celluloid and light who has been with us for so long, this master seducer, here is emblematic of the magic and seductive power of film itself...Dracula's transformative powers can also be equated with those of the film. Not only can he become the camera, he's a one-man special effects

show, transforming himself into mist [and] disembodied shadows" (100). Whalen's argument is important in acknowledging that by including films in academic writing on Victorian literature, such as *Dracula* and *Carmilla,* there is an acknowledgement that the literature itself cannot be removed from its historical context, but films made from literary texts demand representation, appropriate casting, and provide an opportunity to visually create the aesthetic of a pictureless text within a modern context. Dracula asserts his own power in the novel, but through film, Dracula becomes a powerful *icon.* When approaching themes of sexual empowerment or sexual identity, films are able to create enough sexual tension to mark the beginning of a sexual scene, establish the character who holds power in the scene, and describe the dynamics of the scene in ways that Victorian texts do not provide due to cultural, creative, or formatting limitations. The feminist lens then applies to the ways in which women characters are portrayed on screen as a response to or alongside the novel representations. Furthermore, the circulation of pictures, GIFs (graphic interchange format), and quotations from films of *Dracula* and *Carmilla* strengthens the lasting impact and preserves the relevancy of these texts. The sexual aesthetic, which refers to the personal collection of items and ideas that come together to form the sexual performance, can become tangible through film.

Moving forward in literary criticism, positive representations of sexual empowerment and feminism in literature typically take a direct focus on the female characters as whole people without reducing them to binaries, such as the virgin/whore complex and victims or heroines, and connect the text to the ever changing work of feminist practices. Since the creation of intersectionality, feminism can no longer be

defined in one way with only one set of ideas. Feminist values are defined by the person who carries them, and since feminism is experienced differently and benefits everyone in different ways, the same openness should be applied to feminist analyses of Victorian literature. For example, sex work, which encompasses prostitution, adult film acting, exotic dancing, etc., is becoming more widely respected, recognized, and the fight for protections of sex workers is growing more diligent. Sex work is certainly represented in Victorian literature; for example, Nancy from Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* is considered a thief although her actual job is never named. I use Nancy as an important example because the text suggests that she may have been forced into prostitution due to her class and sex, but during the entirety of her role in the novel, she takes care of Oliver despite being plagued with anxiety and guilt over her lifestyle. Tragically, Nancy is murdered by gang member, Sikes. Nancy's character is a Victorian representation of how sex workers are violently mistreated by their communities and government because her job cannot even be named, she develops anxiety as a result of having low self-worth about being a prostitute, and she is eventually brutalized because she is viewed as an object void of humanity and somehow unworthy of respect. The violence that Nancy faced still exists currently, and current feminist studies of the novel could help deepen and exemplify her role as a character by highlighting the important work of sex workers, the continuous threat of violence against them, and how sex workers are reduced to their jobs over their humanity.

Furthermore, positive representations of sexual empowerment and feminism in rapidly developing forms of media can be directly applied to Victorian literature in order

to bridge the gaps between history, the present, and the evolving future. Representations of sexual empowerment during the Victorian era were solely found in literature and art, but twenty-first century academics have exposure to literature, art, film, and music where women are often openly depicted as being confidently sexual. Since twenty-first century academics have access to a much wider and developed range of artistic mediums due to technological advances, the relatability of Stoker, LeFanu, and Brontë's texts has been preserved since allusions to the characters and events in these novels persevere across media interpretations. For example, Catherine Hardwicke's 2008 film *Twilight*, based on Stephanie Meyer's 2005 novel of the same name, is often compared to *Dracula* in that teenage girlhood is made complicated by vampiric romantic partners. By engaging two completely different interpretations of a similar story, we are able to gain more insight into the growth of sexual liberation and feminism within our own culture. The growth of feminism and the emphasis on narrative voice within modern literature classrooms has also encouraged readers to challenge the original works of Victorian authors themselves by recreating the story. Jamaica Kincaid's 1990 novella, Lucy*,* heavily inspired by *Villette,* centers the theme of voyeurism in Brontë's text to accentuate a postcolonial reframing. Kincaid's work is an example of readers reclaiming their history by reimagining Victorian female characters as themselves where their stories are not represented.

The female characters in Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* J. Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla,* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* are sexually empowered because they attempt to gain their own voice even through the violence of objectification, degradation, or manipulation. By

viewing the female characters in these novels through a feminist lens, their humanity and identities are at the forefront of an analysis that centers women characters as complex people instead of powerless victims. Approaching Victorian literature through a feminist lens favors not just the female characters, but the feminist reader themselves since women characters in Victorian literature play an important role of communicating the history of women's identity, spaces, and relationships. Feminism is rooted in anti-oppression, and recognizing the female characters in literature as women fighting through their limitations rather than being burdened by their limitations is a significantly stronger approach to exemplifying the importance of feminist analyses

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