

Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla": A Different Vampire Story

Sheridan Le Fanu'nun "Carmilla" eseri: Farklı bir Vampir Hikayesi

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Abstract: The story "Carmilla" was written by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872. It is within a collection of stories published under the title, "In a Glass Darkly". Carmilla is the only vampire story in this book and it has been accepted as one of the most important works of vampire fiction. Le Fanu's story paved the road for Dracula and other vampire stories. It is assumed that he was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816). This story is about a relationship between a young woman, Laura who lives in a remote castle in Austria and a stranger, Carmilla who comes to stay for three months. Later we learn that Carmilla is a vampire and all the girls in the surrounding area and Laura become ill because of her visits at night. Le Fanu creates a vampire story by combining traditional gothic elements and Irish folklore. With this, he aims at questioning Victorian sexual politics. This paper will analyse the story's traditional gothic and folklore elements and how Le Fanu subverts Victorian sexual politics through a vampire story.

Keywords: Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, Irish folklore, victorian sexual politics

Özet: *Carmilla*, İrlandalı yazar Sheridan Le Fanu'nun 1872 de yazdığı uzun hikayesidir. "In a Glass Darkly" isimli bir hikaye koleksiyonu içinde yer alır. Bu kitaptaki tek vampir hikayesidir ve vampir yazınının en önemli eserleri arasında kabul edilir. Bu hikaye, Drakula ve diğer vampirlerin oluşmasında yolu açmıştır. Bu eseri yazarken, Le Fanu'nun Samuel Taylor Coleridge'in "Christabel" isimli şiirinden etkilendiği söylenmektedir. Bu hikaye, Avusturya'da ıssız bir şatoda yaşayan Laura ile bir araba kazasıyla üç aylığına onların evinde kalmak durumunda olan Carmilla'nın garip ilişkisini anlatır. Daha sonra, Carmilla'nın bir vampir olduğunu ve çevrede yaşayan tüm genç kızları Laura da dahil olmak üzere hasta ettiği görülür. Le Fanu geleneksel gotik özellikleri ile İrlanda folklorunun bazı özelliklerini birleştirerek bir vampir hikayesi yazar. Bununla da esasında, Victoria Dönemi İngilteresi'nin cinsiyet politikalarını eleştirmek amaçındadır. Bu makalede, hikayenin klasik gotik öğeleri ve folklorik temaları incelenek ve Le Fanu'nun Victoria Dönemi cinsiyet politikalarını nasıl altüst etmeye çalıştığı incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, İrlanda folkloru, victoria dönemi cinsiyet politikaları

The story "Carmilla" was written by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872. It was published within a collection of stories published under the title, "In a Glass Darkly". "Carmilla" is the only vampire story in this book and it has been accepted as one of the most important works of vampire fiction. It is assumed that Le Fanu was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816). Le Fanu's antagonist Carmilla has certain similiarities with Christabel's Geraldine.

The heroines of the two works are similar, both Laura and Christabel are the children of deceased mothers and are currently in charge of their widowed fathers. Geraldine's presence gives Christabel similar symptoms as Carmilla does to Laura. Both heroines experience troubled

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sleep and weakness in the morning after spending the night with their guest. Le Fanu's story "*Carmilla*" is about a lesbian relationship between a young woman, Laura, who lives in a remote castle in Austria, and a stranger, Carmilla, who comes to stay for three months. With this story, Le Fanu tries to question the sexual politics of the Victorian period. How does he subvert Victorian sexual politics through a vampire story will be the main focus of this study.

"*Carmilla*" is narrated by the victim, Laura, a beautiful and lonely 19 year old girl. She tells the story 10 years later, when she is 29. In the beginning of the story, we see that Laura remembering an incident when she was about six years old. One night, she finds herself alone in her bedroom; nursery maid and nurse were absent. Laura trembles and fears. Suddenly, she sees a young woman kneeling beside her with her hands beneath the covers. The woman embraces her and and lays down beside her on the bed. Then, Laura falls asleep. When she wakes up suddenly, she felt a sensation like two needles stabbing deep into her breast. She cries out. The young woman disappears. The nursery maid later assures Laura that it was she who bent over her, and the rest was a bad dream. Soon a priest comes to pray with Laura to soothe her. This incident's influence upon Laura will be seen later in the story.

The story jumps to when Laura is 19 years old. She lives with her father and servants; her mother had died when she was an infant. They live a quiet life in their remote castle. For a young girl like Laura, it is an isolated existence. She has no companionship except for her governess and the rare visits of neighbours. With the coming of their mysterious guest, Carmilla, Laura's lonely life changes. One day she was walking with her father, they witness a coach accident that injures a girl. The girl's mother is worried and she must not delay her journey while her daughter recovers, and she asks the directions to the nearest village. She informs the father that during her visit the girl will not speak about her family. Carmilla is given a room in the castle. Laura visits her in her room and is surprised to see the woman in her dream of ten years before. Carmilla, too recognizes her. She says she had a strange dream in which she found herself in a strange nursery.

Laura is charmed by Carmilla despite her weird habits. She sleeps until late in the day, refusing to eat food. Carmilla sometimes only drinks hot chocolate or wine, has an hatred to religious objects, and so on. She seems to tire easily and to be fragile, but then unexpectedly returns in a blush of health and energy. Laura's initial fear of her pretty visitor is overcome by a physical attraction. Laura cannot resist her energy. Carmilla visits Laura every night and kisses her with professions of love until she falls asleep. As Carmilla bids goodnight upon their first meeting, she displays an unusual attachment to Laura that gives clues about what is going to happen. Laura describes the encounter by saying, "*she held me close in her pretty arms for a moment and whispered in my ear, "Good night, darling, it is very hard to part with you, but good-night; to-morrow, but not early, I shall see you again"*" (Le Fanu, 1872, 24).

Meanwhile, young girls in the surrounding area are dying of a mysterious illness. People describe this illness as being like malaria. After Carmilla's visits, Laura has strange dreams in which she was kissed by warm lips and then she had feelings of strangulation. Laura herself becomes ill. Laura then has a dream in which her dead mother gives her a clear warning that her life is in danger:

One night, instead of the voice I was accustomed to hear in the dark, I heard one, sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible, which said, "*Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin*". At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her white night dress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood (Le Fanu, 1872, 47).

Her father calls a doctor in order to examine Laura. The doctor tells him not to leave her alone. Then, he moves off with Laura in a carriage for the ruined village of Karnstein. They

leave a message for Carmilla. On the way to Karnstein, Laura and her father come across General Spielsdorf. He tells them his own frightening story. Spielsdorf and his niece had met a young woman named Millarca and her mysterious mother at a costume ball. The General's niece is immediately taken with Millarca. The mother convinces the General that she is an old friend of his and asks that Millarca be allowed to stay with them for three weeks while she attends to a secret matter of great importance. The General's niece falls mysteriously ill and suffers exactly the same symptoms as Laura. After consulting with a priestly doctor whom he had especially requested, the General comes to the realization that his niece is being visited by a vampire. He hides in a closet with a sword and waits until he sees a cat-like creature stalk around his niece's bedroom and which bites her on the neck. He then jumps from his hiding place and attacked the beast, which took the form of Millarca. She flies through the locked door, unharmed. The General's niece dies immediately afterward. When they arrive at Karnstein the General asks a nearby woodsman where he can find the tomb of Mircalla Karnstein. The woodsman relates that the tomb was relocated long ago, by the hero who defeated the vampires that haunted the region. While the General and Laura are left alone in the ruined chapel, Carmilla appears. The General and Carmilla both fly into a rage upon seeing each other and the General attacks her with an axe. Carmilla flees and the General explains to Laura that Carmilla is also Millarca, both anagrams of the original name of the vampire Countess Mircalla Karnstein. Later, Baron Vordenburg, the descendant of the hero who rid the area of vampires long ago, joins them. Vordenburg is an expert on vampires and has discovered that his ancestor was romantically involved with the Countess Karnstein, before she died and became one of the undead. Using his ancestor's notes, he finds the hidden tomb of Carmilla. Then, an Imperial Commission decides to disinter and destroy the body of the vampire on behalf of the ruling Habsburg Monarchy, within whose domains Styria is situated. Afterwards, Laura's father takes her on a year-long vacation to recover from the trauma and regain her health.

The story is told in the first person from Laura's point of view and written about eight years after the events described in the story happened. We know only what Laura knows, which is very little about Carmilla. Even at the end of the story, Carmilla's motives and purpose remain a mystery. It remains a secret as to who or what her mysterious attendants were, why they served her or where they went. How Carmilla picks Laura to prey upon also remains a mystery.

Sheridan Le Fanu begins his story by stressing Laura's nationality. Laura has never been to England. Her father, also English, has retired from Austrian Service. They speak English together, read Shakespeare to keep up the language and drink tea in the English manner. Despite of her insistence on English heritage she is, through her mother, related to a local family, the Karnsteins, and lives in an isolated castle as she describes in the first pages:

I have said "the nearest inhabited village", because there is, only three miles westward, that is to say in the direction of General Spielsdorf's schloss, a ruined village, with its quaint little church, now roofless, in the aisle of which are the mouldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstaein, now extinct, who once owned the equally desolate chateau which, in the thick of the forest, overlooks the silent ruins of the town (Le Fanu, 1872, 6).

"Carmilla" has both elements of traditional Gothic fiction and of Irish folklore. As Robert Tracy states, the character of Carmilla carries some Irish *ban si* (banshee) features (1993, XXII). The banshee is an Irish spirit who haunts a family and foretells or announces the deaths of family members. Like the banshee, Carmilla is attracted to Laura's family and is her distant ancestor. She is also beautiful, wears white garments and has nocturnal habits. Carmilla arrives in a carriage with a mysterious woman who pretends to be her mother. A carriage accident happens

which it seems was planned by Carmilla. After the accident, her attendant talks to Laura's father and wants permission from her father to look after her until she comes and takes her back. Carmilla here pretends to be too sick to travel. Carmilla finds herself a new home and a new prey. This motif is to be found in Irish folklore as well. However, Carmilla is outside the banshee tradition in certain ways. The banshee do not suck blood, nor are they destroyed with stakes and bonfires.

Apart from being influenced by Irish folklore, the most striking thing about this story is its strong lesbian elements. In a vampire story, it is generally normal to see perverse sexuality. However, in a story written in 1872, it is unusual to see lesbian love. Not only is Laura in danger of dying through her contact with Carmilla but there is a fear that she could become a lesbian. Laura is typical bait for a vampire. She is lethargic and does not fight for her life. It sometimes seems that she is ready to die. Although she loves and hates Carmilla at the same time, she is not willing to focus on their relationship and remove herself from it. It is possible that Carmilla may have had her under some sort of vampire mind control but it is not clear from the story if this is the case. In fact, it is not possible that Laura was under vampire control because even years after Carmilla has gone Laura is still haunted by her and often thinks she hears her footsteps.

Fred Botting (1996) asserts that the play between mythological and modern significance, between mystical and scientific visions of horror and unity, sexuality and sacred violence, is focused in the figure of the vampire. A scientific version of the quest for eternal life, the story highlights the horrible illusions of alchemical powers that surround contemporary science. He continues:

In contrast, Sheridan Le Fanu's Carmilla makes no attempt to rationalise superstition within the bounds of everyday realism or (the sic) nineteenth century. The gothic features of the narrative temporally and geographically distance the story from the present. The vents are framed as a case from the files of Le Fanu's psychic doctor, Martin Hesslius. Castles, ruins, chapels and tombs signal the Gothic tradition and its atmosphere of mystery and superstition. At the center of the mystery is "Carmilla" a beautiful young woman who arrives at the castle of an aristocratic family. Uncannily, Carmilla is the very image of a figure who appeared, years before, in a childhood dream of the family's daughter Laura. The latter, attracted to and repulsed by Carmilla, establishes an intimate acquaintance. Deaths occur in the locality, accompanied by supersititious rumblings. Oblivious, Laura soon becomes the prey of Carmilla. Laura is saved however, by the intervention of the guardian of one of Carmilla's other victims. As vampire lore is expounded, and her tomb discovered, Carmilla is subjected to the traditional measures of decapitation and a stake through the heart, a perfectly natural end in a story in which superstition, legend and folklore are part of the everyday reality (Botting, 1996, 94).

The characterization of Carmilla is different from the other vampire characterizations. She does not drink blood from the neck of her victims but rather from the breast. Vampires were seen as pure evil creatures that were driven by an outstanding force to extend their lives by drinking the blood of the living. Le Fanu shows us that Carmilla is not the two-dimensional beast that the majority of vampire fiction of the time describes. There are a few scenes where Carmilla seems to be aware of her nocturnal life and despairing of her terrible plight. Carmilla only feeds because she must in order to continue her existence and does not wish to infect others with her

curse or kill them with her nightly feeding. This seems evident in the attachment Carmilla makes with each of her victims. Some may think that she sees only her victims as preys. However, some may think that she really loves them. Unlike the traditional vampire folk legends, Carmilla is unique. The lesbian implications are transparent and like other vampires of legend, Carmilla is able to shape shift in order to move, but here too, the shifting of her shape is different, both mist and animalistic. She takes the form of a cat Laura describes "*I saw something moving around the foot of the bed, which at first I could not accurately distinguish. But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat*" (Le Fanu, 1872, 41). With movements that appear mystic and magical, Carmilla moves through doors and walls, particles of light and dark that confuse and confound.

The story is touching because it emphasizes the companionship and emotional link that is shared by the two leading ladies. Laura just wants a friend to fill her life with some happiness, never knowing Carmilla's terrible purpose. Likewise, Carmilla truly enjoys having someone to admire her and have a sisterly bond with. But the darkness that has a hold on Carmilla's deceased soul has twisted her into something deprived of the humanity she so desperately seeks. As the saying states, she is forced to destroy the things she loves the most. The beauty and love of the relationship are shattered by the forces of evil. In conclusion, we sympathize with both Laura and Carmilla. The final scene involving Carmilla's extermination is an act of release and salvation than a deed based upon vengeance and hatred.

"*Carmilla*" is neither a simple vampire tale nor the retelling of folk legends. Like other works of gothic fiction, this story too reflects the society in which it was created. The fear and uncertainty of the vampire mirrors the fear and uncertainty felt by so many in the mid-nineteenth century (Wohl, 2006, 6). For Le Fanu sexuality becomes the key element in defining his vampire Carmilla. By utilizing basic elements of Irish folklore and combining them with the taboo sexuality of the lesbian, Le Fanu finds a way through his fiction to challenge the late Victorian status quo. Le Fanu created a character that maintains a powerful psychological as well as literary impact more than one hundred years later. Wohl assumes that:

The story "Carmilla" demonstrates Le Fanu's skill at utilizing Gothic fiction to encapsulate his world. Through the concept of sexuality he dared to take on 1) society, 2) science and 3) theology. Most think of vampire stories in terms of eternal life. Le Fanu reached further and used the vampire to challenge the world itself, both seen and unseen (Wohl, 2006, 6).

Le Fanu uses sexuality to explore changing roles and the turbulence of a shifting society. Even more than sexuality, he embraced the taboo subject of lesbianism to illustrate subtle and discomfiting changes. Michelis describes this as:

Carmilla refuses to take her place in the realm of death and the past of the tale's discursive order. She still reigns supremely as a constant reminder of the relevance of splitting and the dissolution of separateness as underlying the concept and construction of identity and here in particular femininity, itself (2003, 20).

Towards the end of the 19th century, with the rise of literary realism and the search for new subjects, homosexuality became topical. In *Victorian Fiction*, Gail Marshall writes that "*outside the realms of fiction, women were pushing still further against the boundaries of expectation and tradition*" (2002, 61). The ideal image of a Victorian woman has always been compared to an angel. That angel must stay at home. She has to care for her husband and children. However, Victorian women were looking for greater independence, for equal access to education, for a

political voice, and for suffrage. All these were contrary to the traditional place women occupied in civilized society. The death of Le Fanu's wife also deeply influenced him during the writing process with all these changes in women's status. Judith Halberstam's debate that "... Gothic is also a narrative technique, a generic spin that transforms the lovely and the beautiful into the abhorrent and then frames this transformation within a humanist moral fable" (1995, 22) speaks directly to Le Fanu's creation. In "*Carmilla*", there is a lovely and beautiful woman, the stereotypical woman, such as Le Fanu expected from his wife, and in many respects, did not receive. Carmilla, like Susanna, was not what the surface presented. In the case of his wife, we have by all accounts a psychologically troubled woman whose psychosis resulted in her early death. For Carmilla, beneath the beautiful exterior there was trouble waiting for the precise moment to lay waste that which was familiar and comfortable. From the outset, Carmilla becomes precisely the creature Halberstam suggests (1995, 22). As Laura describes upon her first visit with Carmilla:

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 descriptably engaging (Le Fanu, 1872, 23).

Sheri Wohl explores the fact that through Laura's eyes comes the hint at the monster behind the lovely facade (2006, 15). Through Laura also comes the traditional woman that is beginning to be replaced by women reaching for independence and identity. She embodies those characteristics that history has seen fit to infuse into the perfect woman. She is gentle and pretty, well bred and obedient, a direct contrast to the evil vampire Carmilla who hides behind the face of beauty, and who seeks to spread her evil through sexual allure and seduction. Nina Auerbach writes of the female vampire, "*her vampirism... is an interchange, a sharing, an identification, that breaks down the boundaries of familial roles and the sanctioned hierarchy of marriage*" (1995, 47) as opposed to the prim and proper Laura. In Carmilla, he seems to speak directly to women's changing roles in society by pointing out the unreliability of history as well as tradition. The status quo was being threatened and it was a threat that came from within. Carmilla herself is a dichotomy, both beauty and monster, posing the question: is the threat to status quo good or bad? (Wohl, 2006, 15).

At the same time, there is a sense of guilt threading its way through the narrative. The traditional woman defined by Laura is weak and ineffectual. She is torn between the knowledge of her proper place and the warmth and desire she feels for this sensual woman who touches her softly. It seems wrong and yet feels so good. Carmilla herself is the seductress who is the cause of the conflict mirroring the controversy within society and within Le Fanu himself. Count Dracula is a monster that wears a monster's face. Carmilla is a monster who wears a woman's face and that is what sets apart or as Auerbach describes this as "... *his vampire invokes rather the horror inherent in the Victorian dream of domestic coziness, the restoration of lost intimacy and comfort*" (1995, 44).

In a review of Carmilla's stage production, Katy Walsh (2011) defines lesbian vampires as "*Victorian Era feminists*". Then she asks "*what was the better condition for a women living in that era?*". They were going to become victims in loveless marriages and male dominated culture or being forever young and taking what they want as a vampire. This is really what Sheridan Le Fanu wants to do. He wants the reader to question the sexual politics of the Victorian period. He does not like the traditional belief that women should stay at home and only do housework. Laura is the typical representative of this kind of women. He creates another character that is opposite of Laura. But there is only one problem. The alternative to this

kind of traditional woman is a vampire who is all powerful. This also makes this story very interesting. He also skillfully uses Irish folklore with traditional gothic elements and creates a really interesting and unusual vampire story. *Carmilla* should have been read by true fans of fiction, not just because it is a good read, but because of how it has influenced so many other stories in this genre, most notably Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

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