

Contextualizing *Carmilla*:

Bridging the gap between the gothic, the lesbian vampire, and fanfiction

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that *Carmilla* (Canada, Spencer Maybee 2014-2016), a 121-episode web series shot in vlog format that follows the relationship between a human girl, Laura Hollis, and a female vampire, Carmilla Karnstein occupies a liminal space between fanfiction and industrial product. My understanding of this liminal space has been informed by the work of Aymar Jean Christian. The series is loosely inspired by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella and the many previous filmic adaptations of the novella, but adapted to contemporary university life. Referring to the scholarship of Sarah Parker, Andrea Weiss and Barbara Creed, I propose that the *Carmilla* series has been born out of two major literary and film traditions: the lesbian gothic and the status of the lesbian vampire in film history.

Keywords: Lesbian, Queer theory, vampires, fanfiction, Gothic, literature, film, fandom, internet culture

1.1 Introduction

This essay explores the three traditions that *Carmilla*, a YouTube web series, has grown out of: the spectre of the lesbian in Gothic literature, the history of lesbian vampires in film, and contemporary vampire media. Drawing on these three traditions, *Carmilla* occupies a grey area between fan work and industrial product. *Carmilla* is a contemporary adaptation of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella of the same name. The

series follows human Laura Hollis (Elise Bauman), her vampire lover Carmilla Karnstein (Natasha Negovanlis), and their group of friends as they fight ancient gods, a hostile university administration, and other supernatural beings. Most of the series' cast and crew are queer, including producer Stephanie Ouaknine and story editor Ellen Simpson, as well as actors Natasha Negovanlis (*Carmilla*), Elise Bauman (*Laura*), Kaitlyn Alexander (*LaFontaine*) and Matt O'Connor (*Wilson Kirsch*). I argue that the series

creators make interventions into these three traditions in order to reflect a version of contemporary queer desire, focusing on the experiences of a middle-class white lesbian university student. Though the series' creators identify as fans of popular vampire and lesbian media and the series as an expression of their love, the project was produced by a professional production company and is commercially distributed.

Drawing on the work of literary and film scholars such as Sarah Parker, Andrea Weiss, and Barbara Creed, in this essay I will investigate *Carmilla's* gothic past, situate the *Carmilla* series in a history of lesbian vampire representation, and analyse the series' references to other kinds of vampire-related media. In conversation with media scholar Aymar Jean Christian, I will also explore *Carmilla's* in-between status that builds upon both fan and industrial communities and that encourages the formation of a lesbian fandom built upon feeling.

1.2 *Carmilla's* Gothic past

The *Carmilla* series' Gothic past can be traced back to the 1872 novella it is based on—*Carmilla* by Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Film scholars Andrea Weiss, Barbara Creed, and David Baker credit this novella with being one of two source texts for almost all lesbian vampire media.¹ *Carmilla*, the novella, was set in the real town of Styria, Austria. In the novella, a young and naive Laura befriends Carmilla after Carmilla's carriage breaks down in front her mansion. Carmilla and Laura develop a fast friendship, which eventually leads to Carmilla pursuing her romantically. Laura begins to have feverish dreams

after meeting Carmilla, particularly of a cat-like creature biting her on the breast. The discovery of this bite by a male doctor from the village leads to the uncovering of Carmilla's plot and ultimately her death at the hands of Baron Vordenberg, a descendent of the family that rid the area of vampires years ago. Carmilla is staked through the heart, her head cut off, and her body burnt and thrown into the river. The novella serves as a cautionary tale against the evils of lesbianism and restores the male to the position of active agent.

According to British author John W. Cousin, Le Fanu was famous for presenting the mysterious and the supernatural.² English scholar Sarah Parker claims that the Gothic genre is associated with the desire to articulate what is unspeakable or repressed.³ Similarly, English scholar Anne Williams argues that the Gothic is defined less by specific motifs such as the haunted castle or monster, and more by a concern for boundaries, such as the physical limitations of domestic space.⁴ The Gothic is often organised around what happens when repressed desires lead to the destruction of a patriarchal family unit. Lesbian desire is one example of the transgression of familial boundaries. Women's fiction scholar Paulina Palmer claims that the most common themes explored in lesbian gothic texts are a woman's problematic relationship with her body, transgressive aspects of female sexuality, intricacies of female friendships, relationships between mother and daughter, portrayals of women as both hero and victim of persecution, and the haunting of one woman by another.⁵ Along these lines, Le Fanu's novella portrays female sexuality as deviant, warns against the development of close friendships between young women, and shows how the meek, virginal, pure

¹ The other is the historical figure of Countess Elizabeth Bathory [1560-1614] who was accused of killing over 600 young women and bathing in their blood to maintain her youth and beauty.

² John W. Cousin, *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature*, (Frankfurt am Main: Outlook Verlag, 2018), 780.

³ Parker, "The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roots Her Heart," 7.

⁴ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 22.

⁵ Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive fictions*, (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), 10.

Laura becomes a victim of the mysterious, sexual, strong Carmilla. One important difference between Le Fanu's text and the typical lesbian gothic text is that while the women tend to be either victims or villains, all the heroes in *Carmilla* are men. The *Carmilla* web series echoes many of these Gothic lesbian tropes, although in a more comic mode. Carmilla complains about having to menstruate for hundreds of years and she seduces a series of young women. The show depicts the friendship between a group of primarily queer women. Carmilla's relationship with her bloodthirsty mother is strained. Carmilla's character is portrayed as both hero and victim of abuse. However, in contrast to the novella, the *Carmilla* series separates the categories of the monstrous and the lesbian. I consider the *Carmilla* series as a response to the Gothic lesbian tradition: it challenges the doom and gloom of the genre through moments of humor and lightness, while retaining certain aspects of the genre, such as old buildings with muddled histories and supernatural mystery. For example, in "Disorientation" (S1, Ep 1) Laura describes a sentient search window looking for Dudley Chapel, a building on campus that burnt down in 1904. She describes the fire as "harmless prank or terrifying mystery waiting..." before she is interrupted by her party girl roommate Betty (Grace Glowicki).

According to English scholar Anne Williams, the Gothic genre's engagement with the repressed creates the opportunity to explore the psychological state of women. Referring to Charlotte Brontë's 1847 Gothic novel *Jane Eyre*, she argues that the book's madwoman in the attic serves as a metaphor for the transgressive nature of the genre: "the madwoman, though hidden and confined...seems fully capable of escaping her confinement and burning the house down."⁶ While the "Female Gothic," a term coined by literary

scholar Ellen Moers, focuses on women's experiences of patriarchal domestic space—her experiences are seen as journey towards some kind of agency in a world dominated by men—the "Male Gothic" depicts the male character as controlling the passive female victim.⁷ Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is a classic example of the Male Gothic genre. In contrast, the *Carmilla* series takes advantage of the repressed lesbianism present in the novella and brings what was "unspeakable into articulation."⁸

I argue that the *Carmilla* series is one answer to the question posed by sexuality studies scholar Sarah Parker: "[W]hat if lesbian authors were to wield the Gothic for their own ends?"⁹ Not only does the *Carmilla* series include certain Gothic motifs, such as an old, Victorian-era university with a Town Hall and chapel that burnt down in the 20th century, the series also incorporates the narrative elements of nightmares. Furthermore, if, as Anne Williams argues, the Gothic is structured around the patriarchal family, then it must be noted that all the supposed monsters in the *Carmilla* series - Carmilla, Carmilla's sister Mattie Belmonde (Sophia Walker), and Carmilla's mother The Dean - all faced untold horrors at the hands of men.

The *Carmilla* series gives all three of these women the space to exact their revenge. For example, the hero who destroys Carmilla in the novella, Baron Vordenberg, is one of the main antagonists in season two. He describes Carmilla as a "ravager of virtue" in "Emergency Procedures" (S2, E13), a description that reflects the heterosexual man's anxiety about the lesbian vampire. In the series, Vordenberg tells Laura that as a countess, Carmilla was promised to his great-great grandfather, who was deeply in love with her. That love prompted him to hide her when she

⁶ Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 8.

⁷ Michelle Denise Wise, *"I am a Monster, Just Like She Said": Monstrous Lesbians in Contemporary Gothic Film*, PhD Dissertation, Middle Tennessee State University (2016): 20.

⁸ Parker, "The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roots Her Heart," 8.

⁹ Parker, "The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roots Her Heart," 8.

became a monster and in return she killed his entire family. However, in a flashback scene from “Co-Existence” (S2, E30), Mattie reveals that Vordenberg’s ancestor was in fact a necrophiliac that stole Carmilla’s body from her grave and kept her locked in a dungeon. After freeing herself from his shackles, Carmilla killed his family in revenge. I interpret Baron Vordenberg as representative of the patriarchal system that permeates the gothic; in the series, his character is dedicated to ridding Silas University of the monstrous, including lesbianism. His death in the last episode of season two at the hands of lesbian human Laura Hollis is an example of how the lesbian can transform the gothic.

Le Fanu’s Laura and the *Carmilla* series’ Laura have certain similarities, but are also vastly different. While both Lauras are kind, sweet, and sensitive, Le Fanu’s Laura is a passive recipient of her father’s orders, her handmaids’ gossip, and Carmilla’s charms. In contrast, Laura from the series actively attempts to write her own destiny, refusing to be a pawn in the plans of ancient gods, vampires, and vampire slayers. Laura’s character seems inspired by a character from another popular Gothic vampire novel, Mina Harker from Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*. In “Best Laid Plans” (S1, Ep 16), while discussing her plans to lure in and trap her vampire roommate, Laura asks “What would Mina Harker do?” Just as Mina Harker, who appears in Bram Stoker’s novel and most of its filmic adaptations, mounts an attack against *Dracula* by collecting evidence of his assaults against innocent women, Laura Hollis amasses evidence against Carmilla to prove that she was involved in the disappearance of multiple girls on campus, including Laura’s roommate, Betty. However, the parallels between Laura and Harker end here—the former becomes romantically entangled with her vampire roommate and they get a happy ending, while the latter is turned into a vampire by *Dracula* and then rescued by vampire-hunter Professor Abraham Van Helsing. Mina Harker’s happy ending comes in the form of a

husband and son. In *Dracula*, the vampire’s destruction is corrected by the heterosexual family, whereas in the *Carmilla* series, the happy ending is reserved for the lesbian human-vampire couple.

The creators of the *Carmilla* series manipulate Gothic convention to a degree that destabilizes the very narrative structure of the genre. The series directly confronts the Gothic’s tendency to centre the heterosexual experience as triumphing over the monster. The *Carmilla* series attempts to liberate the lesbian vampire from the confines of the Gothic by making Baron Vordenberg an antagonist and ensuring that Carmilla survives his wrath with the help of her friends.

1.3 Sex, blood, and rock ‘n’ roll – *Carmilla* and cinema’s lesbian vampires

Why does the lesbian vampire continue to hold such importance in popular culture? Andrea Weiss argues that the persistence of the association between lesbianism and vampirism can be traced back to a large number of lesbian vampire novels that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century and representations of lesbians in cinema.¹⁰ According to lesbian historian Lillian Faderman, the vampire metaphor served to explain the transition from socially-accepted close female friendships in the nineteenth century to the redefinition of such friendships as deviant in the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹ I further attribute the attractiveness of the vampire to their status as both insider and outsider, in that the vampire is often a rich and intellectual figure but also represents the debased parts of human sexuality. As a result, vampires are able to move amongst the upper echelons of society even whilst giving into their hunger and lust.

While lesbian vampire films span almost a century, from at least the 1930s to the present, the period between the late 1960s and early 1970s has been the most studied. These films include *Black*

¹⁰ Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, 84, 87.

¹¹ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 342.

Sunday (Italy, Mario Bava, 1960), *The Vampire Lovers* (UK, Roy Baker, 1970), *Vampyros Lesbos – Die Erbin des Dracula* (Germany/Spain, Jess Franco, 1971), *Twins of Evil* (UK, John Hough, 1971), and *Lust for a Vampire* (UK, Jimmy Sangster, 1971).¹² Feminist film scholar Barbara Creed argues that the lesbian vampire film of the 1970s openly explored the relationship between sex, violence, and death.¹³ The emphasis on sex is connected to the lesbian vampire's power of seduction, which has both a positive and negative connotation. The lesbian vampire's decision to seduce her victims rather than kill them gestures toward a desire to turn her victims into accomplices. A similar phenomenon can be seen in *Carmilla*. As Laura figures out in "A Visit From The Dean" (S1, Ep 11), it is Carmilla's "study buddies" that are being abducted— "study buddies" referring to her various sexual partners. I see another common trope of the lesbian vampire genre in the disappearance of Carmilla's "study buddies," which is that violence is meted out to those women that the vampire is sexually attracted to. Carmilla's ex-girlfriend, Elle, and Laura also face particular hardships because of their romantic association with Carmilla.

In *The Vampire Lovers* and *Twins of Evil*, two of the three Hammer Film productions based on the *Carmilla* novella, Carmilla is portrayed as the main villain because of her enjoyment in seducing and ultimately destroying women. However, in the *Carmilla* series, the main antagonist is not Carmilla, it is her mother, The Dean. While Carmilla does enjoy the process of seduction in the series, she is painfully aware of the end that will meet the women who fall in love with her and therefore does everything in her power to save them.

According to Weiss, the lesbian vampire terrifies the male spectator by articulating anxieties about his maleness, only to reaffirm that maleness through the vampire's death.¹⁴ In *The Vampire Lovers*, Laura's father General Spielsdorf (Peter

Cushing) leads a team of vampire hunters toward killing and ultimately decapitating Carmilla. General Spielsdorf is depicted with a stiff body, one that exudes a cold and cruel demeanor. The series turns Laura's father into a caring man who eventually reconciles himself with Carmilla. He first appears in "All the Rage" (S3, Ep 8). While he does not condone Laura's relationship with a vampire—more out of over-protectiveness rather than prejudice—he and Carmilla end up bonding over their shared interest in Laura's safety. Initially, he insists on taking Laura back home, but after finding out about The Dean's plan to unleash hell on earth, Laura convinces her father that she cannot leave with him. His heart-to-heart with Carmilla happens in "Memory Lane" (S3, Ep 12). After having a minor tussle with Laura about wearing protective gear when she goes on her quests, Carmilla confronts him with the idea that putting Laura in an ivory tower may not be the best way to protect her. Their conversation eventually leads to him boasting about all the injustices Laura fought against as a child. Mr. Hollis is simultaneously proud of and terrified for his daughter. He is sometimes smothering but always willing to listen to her. In this, he reminds me of my mother. In fact, his depiction as a slightly overbearing but fiercely loving single dad is almost anti-patriarchal. While his daughter's sexuality poses no problems for him and he does not bat an eyelash when Laura's friend LaFontaine (Kaitlyn Alexander) asks him to use they/them pronouns, his daughter's propensity to take on evil, immortal, supernatural beings is what he at first fails to understand. Eventually, he even comes to understand her fight.

Weiss argues that the cinematic lesbian vampire narrative is formulaic: the vampire appears and disrupts the natural (read: patriarchal) order; she engages in acts of vampirism for entertainment and sexual titillation during the middle section of the film; until she is destroyed

¹² Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, 84.

¹³ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 224.

¹⁴ Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, 90.

and the natural order is restored.¹⁵ An additional generic convention is the bisexual triangle of desire: a man is aligned with the forces of good, the vampire with the forces of evil, and the woman whose fate dangles in the middle is usually nice, sweet, and receptive to both.¹⁶ The *Carmilla* series deviates from this narrative formula in several ways. Firstly, alignment with the values of good and evil do not take place along gendered lines - in fact, the labels of good and evil are in themselves murky. The character of Carmilla is a clear example of this claim. While she has participated in her mother's sacrificing of young girls to an ancient fish god, she has also attempted to save several of these girls. She expressed terrible anger after her sister Mattie's death in season two—threatening to kill anyone who crossed her path—and then separated herself from Laura and her friends to prevent from hurting them.

The bisexual triangle of desire ensures the lesbian vampire's destruction. By ensuring the death of the lesbian vampire, men alleviate their fear of lesbian love being a viable alternative; for it is horrific for them to believe that two women could prefer each other over a man.¹⁷ For the *Carmilla* series, lesbian love is not an alternative model but the main model - the only love triangle in season one is between Carmilla, Laura, and Danny, Laura's English Teaching Assistant. Furthermore, Laura and Carmilla get their happy ending despite being almost murdered in every episode.

In tracing the relationship between the lesbian vampire and blood, Barbara Creed argues that the lesbian vampire is a menstrual monster.¹⁸ Besides being monstrous because of their sexuality, lesbian vampires are further abject because of their ability to make a woman's blood flow. Blood coursing out of a woman brings to

mind images of menstruation, which is considered impure within a number of a religious and cultural discourses. The scene of the lesbian vampire biting her victim is doubly abject because a woman, already abject, releases the blood of another woman, an abject act. Feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva argues that the blood of a woman is more abject than the blood of a man because it reinforces sexual difference and reminds the man of the woman's ability to procreate, which leaves the man with a sense of growing anxiety.¹⁹

Therefore, the vampire myth may be used to explain the passage to menstruation.

While the *Carmilla* series does not engage with the relationship between the lesbian vampire and menstruation in such detail, U by Kotex (the series' main producer) does capitalise on this association.

Figure 1: Vampires get their periods

In keeping with their menstrual hygiene brand, U by Kotex sponsored a video featuring Carmilla and Laura answering the age-old question: Do vampires get their periods? The answer is yes. According to this video, Carmilla has had 4000 periods and is a fan of the modern pad. She claims that human periods and vampire periods are pretty similar, barring the fact that vampires replenish the lost blood by drinking blood. Creed actually makes note about a popular European belief in the sixteenth century—that of a woman becoming a vampire to replace the blood she lost during menstruation.²⁰ The video also includes interesting period facts like how World War I nurses started to use the bandages used for wounded soldiers during their menstruation period because it absorbed more blood. I read this transmedial video as a wink toward the tradition of

¹⁵ Weiss *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, 91, 92.

¹⁶ Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, 92.

¹⁷ Bonnie Zimmerman, "Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampires," *Jump Cut* 24-25 (1981) 23.

¹⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 235.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 96.

²⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 238.

linking the female vampire with menstruation while also attempting to normalise the act of menstruation by encouraging conversations about periods. The video also serves as an advertisement for U by Kotex.

The ruthlessness of Carmilla's mother reinforces certain patriarchal structures that inform the Male Gothic. While the lesbian vampire may be redeemed in the *Carmilla* series, the mother figure remains monstrous. The Dean is not Carmilla's mother by blood, but she is the one who raised Carmilla after she was turned into a vampire. Carmilla's biological parents are never mentioned. The Dean seems to be the only maternal presence in Carmilla's life, evidenced by Carmilla referring to The Dean as *maman* (mum in French). According to Julia Kristeva, the mother-child relationship is rife with conflict, with the child struggling to break free and the mother reluctant to release control.²¹ An inability to let go of her child is characteristic of the "archaic mother," who operates in a context in which the father is absent.²² This struggle is clearly reflected in the interactions between The Dean and Carmilla. The Dean wants her favourite child to stop questioning her plans, and Carmilla does not want to be her mother's pawn anymore. The Dean is also an embodiment of psychoanalytic scholar Roger Dadoun's idea of the "archaic maternal figure," a figure that he describes as existing beyond all good and evil, a figure that is totalizing and does not have a knowable form. The audience is never privy to how the Dean looks, we only know her through her voice or interact with her when she possesses one of the characters. Even when Carmilla gets into a fight with her mother in "Mommy Dearest" (S1, E 32), she does so after The Dean takes over Laura's body. Furthermore, the Dean is an example of excess in a mother. The Dean is an ambitious woman, the head of the

board of Silas University, an ancient goddess, and a woman grieving the loss of a lover. All her actions – sacrificing a group of young girls, attempting to kill Laura and her friends, opening the gates of hell – are justified by her mourning of a dead lover; as a result, her character also gestures toward anxieties surrounding women who feel too much. Just as the archaic mother terrifies the patriarchy due to her powers of creation, so The Dean is terrifying due to her ambition and excess.

Film scholar David Baker argues that the vampire should not be understood as a product of a static psychic fear but as a personification of their age.²³ Therefore, the relevance of the lesbian vampire today is connected to what stories she tells about our society. Despite reshaping the discourse on lesbian vampires somewhat, *Carmilla* does fall into the trap of the lesbian vampire whose supposed indiscretions are forgiven because of her ability to fit into the normative. The 1970s saw the rise of a very specific lesbian vampire, one that is well-mannered and polite, upper-class, and physically attractive.²⁴ She is therefore not fully an outsider, but rather both an insider and an outsider, passing as a member of "civilised" society. Carmilla is a similar lesbian vampire—born a countess but now a messy, lethargic, but still attractive teenage vampire, who has enough money to travel the world several times over. It is almost easier to accept her role in her mother's evil plans because of her whiteness, attractiveness, and class status. The audience feels sympathetic toward her inability to control her situation. The same sympathy is not extended to Mattie, a character of colour. In fact, Mattie is killed for an act she did not even commit, whereas Carmilla's previous acts of violence are forgiven and her heroism highlighted.

²¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 13.

²² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 64.

²³ David Baker, "Seduced and Abandoned: Lesbian Vampires on Screen 1968-74," *Erotic Screen and Sound: Culture, Media and Desire* 26, no. 4 (2012): 554.

²⁴ Baker, "Seduced and Abandoned," 557.

1.4 *Carmilla* and Contemporary Vampiric Media

At the heart of the *Carmilla* series is a rag-tag group of friends who take on vampires, vampire slayers, ancient gods, and other supernatural creatures. One major influence on *Carmilla* is the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series. The head writer of *Carmilla*, Jordan Hall, proclaimed at the first CarmillaCon that she was obsessed with *Buffy* as a graduate student and that *Carmilla* was her opportunity to create her own vampire-related media.²⁵ Important parallels between *Buffy* and *Carmilla* include: a brooding vampire with a good heart (*Carmilla* = *Angel*), a central character dedicated to sniffing out trouble and extinguishing it (*Laura* = *Buffy*), love triangles that involve the brooding vampire, and a “big evil” that must be defeated.

The tonality of the two shows are also very similar—almost every review of the *Carmilla* series, fan and professional, comment on the campiness of both. Dana Piccoli on *AfterEllen* wrote “If you loved *Buffy* and *Supernatural*, you’ll love *Carmilla*.”²⁶ Kathryn Diaz on *BitchFlicks*, a website dedicated to reviewing films and television series through a feminist lens, claims “[...] the new setting and plot that *Carmilla* adapts in its transformation nestles it in the same company as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.”²⁷ *Buffy* and *Carmilla* both incorporate snarky humour in their dialogue to prevent the content from becoming too

melodramatic. For example, in *Buffy*, *Buffy*’s mother refers to *Buffy*’s inner tussle between *Star* and *Angel* by asking which ornament should be placed at the top of the Christmas tree and, in *Carmilla*, *Laura* uses sock puppets to tell *Carmilla*’s story of heartbreak and betrayal. Some members of the *Carmilla* fandom refer to *Laura* and her friends as the Scooby-gang, a reference from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (as well as, obviously, the animated TV series *Scooby-Doo* (1969-present)). There is even a Tumblr page dedicated to *Buffy* and *Carmilla* crossover memes.²⁸ These crossover memes usually have images from the *Carmilla* series with superimposed text from *Buffy*.

Figure 2: A *Buffy/Carmilla* Crossover

In the meme shown in Figure 2, the image is from season one of *Carmilla*, whereas the dialogue is from a *Buffy* episode in which *Buffy*’s best friend *Willow* confronts *Buffy* about being in love with *Angel*. *LaFontaine* in *Carmilla* and *Willow* in *Buffy* have similar reactions to their friend being romantically inclined towards a vampire. In fact, *LaFontaine* is the first of the lot to realise that *Laura* and *Carmilla* have a crush on each other; they also find *Carmilla* equal parts scary and cool. Additionally, pop culture sites like *Buzzfeed* and *The Mary Sue* have recommended the *Carmilla* series to *Buffy* fans.²⁹

In an article titled “The Feminists Making Vampires Gay Again” published in *The Daily*

²⁵ “Creators Panel” 00:20:07.

²⁶ Dana Piccoli, “8 Reasons Why You Should Watch ‘Carmilla’ Now!” *AfterEllen*, October 8, 2014, <https://www.afterellen.com/video/228802-8-reasons-why-you-should-watch-carmilla-now>.

²⁷ Kathryn Diaz, “Moving Us Forward: ‘Carmilla’ the Series,” *BitchFlicks*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2014/12/moving-us-forwards-carmilla-the-series.html#.XnzzktNKhQI>.

²⁸ @Carmilla: The Series Reviewed, “Carmilla X Buffy the Vampire Slayer 5/∞,” Tumblr, May 2, 2015, <https://carmilla-reviewed.tumblr.com/tagged/carmilla-x-btvs>.

Candice Darden, “20 Reasons ‘Carmilla’ Is The Best Show You’re Not Watching,” *BuzzFeed*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.themarysue.com/how-dear-you-are-to-me-ranking-carmillas-10-most-adorable-moments/>.

²⁹ Logan Dalton, “How Dear You Are to Me: Ranking *Carmilla*’s 10 Most Adorable Moments,” *The Mary Sue*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/candicedarden/reasons-why-carmilla-is-underrated>.

Beast, an American news and opinion website that focuses on politics and pop culture, entertainment reporter Amy Zimmerman writes: “For too long now, vampirism has been presented as the exclusive domain of pale men and their fawning female victims.”³⁰ This statement speaks to a recent trend, a trend that effaces the long presence of the lesbian vampire in cinema. The *Twilight* series is probably the most popular vampire story of the 2010s. The books turned movies follow the relationship between a brooding vampire, Edward Cullen, and an insecure human turned powerful vampire, Bella Swan. *Carmilla* capitalises on the popularity of the *Twilight* series, as the first season of *Carmilla* was released in 2014, two years after the final film of the *Twilight* series. The *Carmilla* series references the films through dialogue in a scene where Carmilla is tied to chair with ropes of garlic, watching films on Laura’s laptop, and then exclaims “Ugh! Vampires don’t cry! This is almost as bad as that sparkly twerp!” (“Strategic Planning” S1, Ep 21). The *Carmilla* series also signals the *Twilight* series indirectly in that it is a love story between a human and a vampire, but queerer. *Carmilla* challenges the dominant heterosexuality of both *Buffy* and the *Twilight* series by building on queer vampiric and Gothic narratives.

In telling the story of a charming but lonely and bitter lesbian vampire, the *Carmilla* series borrows from its lesbian vampire ancestors and its supernatural contemporaries and attempts to change certain formulas that stereotyped the lesbian as monstrous. *Carmilla* shows how the connection between queerness and monstrosity can be severed by centering queer and non-binary identities and freely expressing queer love. What is scary in the *Carmilla* series is not the characters’ sexuality or gender identity, but the imminent end of the world whose catalyst is the monstrous

mother, The Dean. I argue that the transformational space occupied by the *Carmilla* series is similar to the one inhabited by fan works, which also toe the line between being true to the source text and changing it to reflect the fan’s own experiences and desires.

1.5 *Carmilla* as Fanfiction

Media scholar Aymar Jean Christian argues that the independent web series takes from both fandom practices and industrial practices. Just as fans reimagine certain narrative structures from popular media, producers of the independent web series do the same. However, fan works and the independent web series are usually discussed through the two different lenses: fan works are usually discussed in relation to a fans rights over a media object and how fan work can be categorized as a type of labour, whereas the independent web series is seen as an extension of the media industry. They also offer up a more flexible means of production as compared to TV shows by major media conglomerates, which allows for more diverse kinds of representation.³¹ While the *Carmilla* series was produced by a number of industrial players such as Smokebomb Entertainment, the digital division of Shaftesbury, the company that produced *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present), and is sponsored by well-known menstrual hygiene brand, U by Kotex, the series nonetheless has its roots in fan cultures. Producer Stephanie Ouaknine, who was working at Shaftesbury, found *Carmilla*’s story editor, Ellen Simpson, through fanfiction. Ouaknine enjoyed Simpson’s *Warehouse 13* fanfiction and reached out to her, proposing that she join *Carmilla*’s crew.³² I propose that the *Carmilla* series shares certain characteristics with fanfiction.

³⁰ Amy Zimmerman, “The Feminist Making Vampires Gay Again,” *The Daily Beast*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-feminists-making-vampires-gay-again>.

³¹ Aymar Jean Christian, “Fandom as Industrial Response,” 1.6.

³² “Creators Panel” 00:51:00.

Writers of internet fanfiction engage with the urtext with the aim of expanding the universe, elaborating on it, combining various works into a singular narrative, and developing varied connections between characters and plot points.³³ Henry Jenkins argues that a fan work is usually saturated with personal experiences, emotions, and identities.³⁴ The *Carmilla* series does something very similar with Le Fanu's novella. The novella focuses on the rise and fall of the vampire, Countess Carmilla Karnstein, and her erotic relationship with Laura, one of her victims. The web series expands the narrative to include Carmilla's brother, William (Aaron Chartland); J.P. Armitage, a boy who got sucked into the library catalogue; Laura's friends, such as Danny Lawrence (Sharon Belle) and Wilson Kirsch (Matt O'Connor); and several other side characters. Furthermore, while the novella's only supernatural aspect is the presence of vampires and vampire slayers, the *Carmilla* series also includes ancient Mesopotamian gods, ghosts, and witches. Characters such as Mattie, whose only presence in the novella was to reinforce the monstrous nature of the vampire, have full-fledged personalities, backstories, and roles in the series. *Carmilla* also brings several types of media into conversation, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, *The Vampire Lovers*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The bringing together of different works is characteristic of crossover fanfiction. Crossover fic authors usually orchestrate the collision of two or more fictional worlds to create another world that is coherent and unique unto itself. The *Carmilla* series is a different kind of crossover fic, one that makes thematic references to other media, instead of

directly incorporating characters, plot points, or contexts from other narratives.

The *Carmilla* series could also be considered a kind of alternative universe (AU) fanfic of the novella by Le Fanu. According to fan studies scholar Natalia Samutina, AU consists of almost any distortion of the canonical universe and extreme changes in characters are usually referred to as out of character or OOC.³⁵ For example, Laura Hollis from the series is OOC. In the novella, Laura is depicted as naive, passive, and unable to exert any agency on the narrative; whereas in the *Carmilla* series, Laura is the driving force behind the plot. AU's are catalysts for fanfiction writers to realise an infinite number of imaginary scenarios, develop or completely change certain characters, and create different versions of fictional worlds. The *Carmilla* series takes advantage of its ability to mould the novella's already existing universe to a different time (the twenty-first century), place (a university), and with a broader cast of characters who are diverse in terms of both gender and sexuality. The alternativeness of a fic varies from slight shifts in related events, often made with the desire to save a character from a terrible fate, to completely changing the whole picture of the world.³⁶ I argue that the *Carmilla* series does a bit of both. Jordan Hall and Ellen Simpson, the writers of the *Carmilla* series, also claim that the events of the novella end mid-season one.³⁷ The web series adapts the story in order to redeem the lesbian vampire and nullify her monstrosity.

³³ Kerri L. Mathew and Devon Christopher Adams, "I Love Your Book, but I Love My Version More: Fanfiction in the English Language Arts Classroom," *The Alan Review* (2009): 36.

³⁴ Henry Jenkins, "Get a Life!: Fans, Poachers, Nerds," in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), xiv.

³⁵ Natalia Samutina, "Fan fiction as World-Building: Transformative Reception in Crossover Writing," *Journal of Media and Culture Studies* 30, no. 4 (2016): 438.

³⁶ Samutina, "Fan fiction as World-Building," 438.

³⁷ "Creators Panel" 00:40:02.

Fanfiction tends to be character driven. Samutina argues that it is a practice driven by an interest in people—their psychology, their differences, the decisions and choices they make, and the realities they may live through.³⁸ Fan studies scholar Mary Ellen Curtin claims that fanfiction is akin to speculative fiction about characters rather than the worlds.³⁹ Speculative fiction is a genre that asks “what if?” The *Carmilla* series asks a similar question of its characters: What if Le Fanu’s Laura refused to be a passive recipient of the ideas expressed by those around her? What if Carmilla was not the villain of the story? Fans are also interested in transformations of class identity⁴⁰: What if Laura grew up middle class instead of rich? These questions are integral to understanding relationships, events, and experiences that make a character who they are. By posing these questions, the creators of the *Carmilla* series build a fictional universe that upsets the connections between femininity and passivity, as well as between lesbianism and monstrosity. Furthermore, the creators incorporate ideas of student resistance by having the narrative play out in a university with an evil administration.

The *Carmilla* series is like a fan work because it was made by queer creators who were fans of other vampire media and because it inverts the structures that organise Gothic narratives and its open challenge to the stereotype of the lesbian vampire, particularly the lesbian vampire of the

1970s. This type of transformative work allows creators and the audience alike to saturate a fictional world with socio-cultural discourses that are of personal importance to them.⁴¹

1.6 Conclusion

Through this essay I hope to have contextualized *Carmilla* by situating the series in the histories of Gothic literature and lesbian vampires on screen. Additionally, I have proposed that the *Carmilla* series challenges these genres in the way that fanfiction does. For example, changing the Victorian setting to the contemporary world frees the characters from certain restrictions, enabling a relationship between Carmilla and Laura that is not exploitative, while still gesturing toward the Gothic through Carmilla’s past as a countess and of course the lesbian vampire. I attribute the desire to transform Carmilla’s narrative to the lived experiences of the primarily queer creators of *Carmilla*. The series’ status as a queer fan product attracts other queer fans, particularly lesbian fans. These lesbian fans meet each other online and at conventions, bond over a variety of shared interests, and create communities of feeling.

³⁸ Samutina, “Fan fiction as World-Building,” 448.

³⁹ Francesca Coppa, “Introduction: Five Things That Fanfiction Is, and, One Thing It Isn’t,” in *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales from the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 12.

⁴⁰ Coppa, “Introduction: Five Things That Fanfiction Is, and, One Thing It Isn’t,” 13.

⁴¹ Samutina, “Fan fiction as World-Building,” 442.

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