JACLR
Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research

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Volume 10 Issue 2 (December 2022)

Guacimara Larrad Ramírez

"Blossoming into Monsterhood: Transgressive Sexuality and Liminality in J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Emily Harris's 2019 Film Adaptation"

Recommended Citation

Larrad Ramírez, Guacimara. "Blossoming into Monsterhood: Transgressive Sexuality and Liminality in J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Emily Harris's 2019 Film Adaptation." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 10.2 (2022): <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Abstract:

This paper undertakes an analysis of the transtextual relationship between Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire novella *Carmilla* and Emily Harris's 2019 filmic adaptation of the same name. Vampires have often been used in Gothic fiction as a reflection of diverse concerns regarding sexuality, both in the form of decadence and corruption, and as a celebration of marginal sexual identities. This paper considers the ways in which the novella and the film portray the construction of the female Other as monstrous, by exploring how the transgressive sexuality of the female protagonists of both texts is expressed. Furthermore, it is argued that in the negotiation of their own difference, Carmilla and Laura/Lara acquire an aura of liminality, whose ambiguity and indefinability displace Otherness as a meaningful category inside the patriarchal system. Carmilla's arrival in both stories initiates a transitional process which, consequently, opens up an ambivalent space for the protagonists in which the hierarchical structures and dichotomous categories on which difference is founded are challenged. This space, therefore, creates an opportunity for the characters to redefine themselves away from the restrictive roles that had been assigned to them. This analysis draws on feminist theory, critical conceptualisations of transgression and monstrosity from the perspective of Gothic fiction, and the ideas of liminality and the "Third Space" outlined, respectively, by Victor Tuner and Homi Bhabha.

Keywords: *Carmilla*, J.S. Le Fanu, Gothic fiction, Emily Harris, transgression, liminality.

Guacimara LARRAD RAMÍREZ

Blossoming into Monsterhood: Transgressive Sexuality and Liminality in J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Emily Harris's 2019 Film Adaptation.

0. Introduction

J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is one of the first instances of literary female vampires. This Gothic novella was first serialised in the magazine *The Dark Blue* from 1871 to 1872, and then reprinted in 1872 in *In a Glass Darkly*, a collection of some of the author's horror and mystery stories, all of which are said to be cases studied by a Dr. Hesselius and edited by an assistant of his. *Carmilla* can be, in fact, regarded as a case study of female sexuality through the intimacy between the eponymous vampire and her victim, Laura. In it, the supernatural functions as an implicit way of exploring female and lesbian desire behind the façade of the fantastic nature of the genre. Subsequent literary and filmic texts have continued to exploit the female vampire and her alluring ambiguity as both "an image of death and an object of desire" (Weiss 23). In recent years, the female vampire film genre has received a greater number of female contributions[1], and one such example is the 2019 British *Carmilla* adaptation by the same name. Written and directed by Emily Harris, the film features Hannah Rae as Lara[2], Devrim Lignan as Carmilla, and Jessica Raine as Miss Fontaine, Lara's governess. *Carmilla* follows the plot of Le Fanu's novella more closely than most previous adaptations, but it also relocates the story, now set in England during the 1780s. Despite making use of Gothic conventions, the film has been described by Harris as "a beautiful coming-of-age story set within a tapestry of religion and fear of the unknown" ("Carmilla" 5). More of a love story than a horror film, it appears to do away with the supernatural, and Carmilla's vampiric nature takes an ambiguous form. The focus of the film is, then, on burgeoning adolescent sexuality, as well as on the relationship between Lara and Carmilla. The exploration of female sexuality is, thus, central to both texts, even if its depiction changes with time: as Auerbach indicates, "what vampires are in any given generation is a part of . . . what [those] times have become" (1). Vampires and eroticism tend to come together, and more explicitly so in the case of female vampires, who "reflect the changing ideas and concerns regarding female sexuality" (Strong 83).

This paper analyses the transtextual relationship between Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) and its aforementioned adaptation to cinema, *Carmilla* (2019), directed by Emily Harris. Its aim is to examine how monstrosity is constructed in the two texts in relation to female sexuality, through a feminist lens as well as drawing on gaze theory and Gothic fiction criticism. In particular, the focus is on two ways in which monstrosity is configured, as transgression and as liminality. The paper intends to explore the specific ways in which the latter is deployed as means to question the construction of female difference.

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[1] Despite the extensive list of women producing vampire literature, contributions by female directors to the female vampire film genre remain sporadic. Some examples are *The Velvet Vampire* (1971), directed by Stephanie Rothman; *Near Dark* (1987), directed by Kathryn Bigelow, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), directed by Ana Lily Amirpour.

[2] Harris has changed the name of Le Fanu's hypotextual character from Laura to Lara, and that of Mademoiselle de Lafontaine, Laura's "finishing governess," to Miss Fontaine.

It is contended that the transgressive desire of the protagonists of the two texts is inextricable from their monstrous nature, which serves as a metaphor for another type of alterity, that of a deviant woman who is an active participant in her sexuality. In particular, it is argued that, in Le Fanu's and Harris's texts, the role of transgression is that of allowing for a negotiation of identity beyond the hierarchical dichotomies of patriarchal society. As a result of the female protagonists' transgressions, an aura of liminality enshrouds them, and, as the following analysis shall prove, the ambiguity of their borderline status ultimately serves as a space of subversion and contestation in both Le Fanu's novella and Harris's adaptation.

From a methodological point of view, I have pursued a comparative analysis of the two texts based on the principles of adaptation theory outlined by Robert Stam in , focusing on the way in which monstrosity is constructed as transgressive desire in both texts. To this end, I have mainly followed Fred Botting's theorisation of Gothic conventions, feminist conceptualisations of gender, sex and female sexuality; and Linda William's analysis of the use of the gaze in monster films. Given, however, that a crucial aspect of my interpretation of the texts in question revolves around the idea of in-betweenness and ontological indeterminacy, in the following sections I shall also define the concept of liminality according to Victor Turner's seminal work on the subject, *The Ritual Process* (1969), as well as Homi Bhabha's idea of the "Third Space" developed in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

1. Of Monstrous Females and Female Monsters: A Theoretical Framework.

1.1. Gender, Sexual Transgression, and the Female Other.

In order to examine the construction of the female characters in both texts, it is necessary to first establish what we understand to be gender, sex, and sexuality. In Gender Studies, the social configuration of men and women is not to be understood as based on "natural" principles. Indeed, first-wave feminists already distinguished between sex and gender in an effort to dispel any notions of biological determinism that considered women to be naturally subordinated to men. The equation male-masculine and female-feminine was further problematised in later studies, as it still assumed gender to be an intrinsic identity, and its conception of "feminine gender identity" was deemed essentialist by third-wave feminists (Young 103). Indeed, according to the seminal queer theorist Judith Butler, gender is not simply the "social signification" of sex, as the latter is not "a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but . . . a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (xii), and is, therefore, controlled by the "regulatory norms" of the heterosexual apparatus. Bodies, then, are not passive receptors of gender, but sites of cultural intervention, in which sexual difference is created. Gender, in turn, is constructed in relation to these bodies; while there is a degree of subjectivity in gender, it is always circumscribed by a specific socio-cultural context. In its social dimension, gender can be described as "a particular form of the social positioning of lived bodies in relation to one another in historically and socially specific . . . processes . . . in which people act and reproduce relations of power and privilege among

them" (Young 109). Men and women are thus gendered and organised in the social order, an arrangement that bears on sexuality.

Sexuality can be understood as the combination of sensations and emotions associated with an individual's sexual desire or attraction, and how it is subjectively and culturally experienced. Gender and sexuality are distinct constructs, but there is an affinity in the way they both are "constituted by and on expression of relations of power" (Nencel 132). In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault points to the creation and development of sexuality by a system increasingly concerned with the management of life, for which the body serves as the locus of power and its control. Sexuality, because of its role in the consolidation of this heteropatriarchal system, is built around the social structuring of genders, and reflects the inequality of power between women and men. In fact, as Gayle Rubin remarks, "because sexuality is a nexus of the relationships between genders, much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within, sexuality" (300). Control over female sexuality is part of the power which male-dominated society exerts over women. Eve Sedgwick indicates in *Between Men* (1985) that the concern of patriarchy with the management of sexuality affects both women and men, but it is women who have less control over it. Female sexuality is subordinated to male kinship systems, that is, the male homosocial relationships that Sedgwick considers can be "applied to such activities as 'male bonding'" and constitute the foundation of patriarchy (1). Women are thoroughly inscribed in those structures and, therefore, lose agency over their own sexuality, which is "defined and reproduced, and used and discredited . . . in exactly the same . . . male-homosocial terms" (Sedgwick 157), and whose existence is not admissible outside those terms. In addition, according to Sedgwick, heterosexuality is necessary to uphold patriarchal structures. The "continuum between homosocial and homosexual . . . for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (Sedgwick 1–2), and fear of homosexuality poses a threat to the male kinship system, which can be assuaged through the inclusion of women as buffers and their exchange among men as a transfer of power. On the other hand, "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (Sedgwick 2), and the bonds among women are not governed by homophobia in the same way men's are. Same-gender relationships among women do not threaten female homosocial relationships but male ones, as they interfere with the exchange of women as a means to maintain patriarchal kinship structures. Expressions of sexuality and desire that defy the dominance of these structures by existing outside of them are subversive, as they bring the legitimacy of the male, heterosexual system into question.

This kind of transgressive sexuality is present in the texts analysed in this paper, since transgression constitutes the primary means through which Gothic texts such as *Carmilla* articulate monstrosity. According to Fred Botting, Gothic fiction demonstrates a fascination with transgression, as it explores the unlicensed and the nightmarish in its quest for extreme and sublime emotions, and appears to celebrate immorality, violence, and illicit passions. Nevertheless, the Gothic genre is never unambiguous, and transgression is also used as a means to alert of the dangers of deviating from the norm and of venturing on the Other side of moral and ideological dichotomies, thus "making negative attributes visible so they can be

seen for what they are and be condemned or destroyed" (Botting 8). In many cases, this warning takes the shape of a monster.

The Gothic monster is an iteration of what Julia Kristeva terms the "abject": that which is "beyond the scope of . . . the tolerable, the thinkable" (1), which is "opposed to I" (1). The abject threatens the annihilation of the self and must, consequently, be refused and excluded. However, it exists as a delimitation which facilitates the process of defining of the self, and so, paradoxically, it is also indispensable. Abjection is, above all, a border, "a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops" so that the "I" can continue to live (Kristeva 9). This boundary, abjection, does not render the self safe, but "acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). It follows that it is boundaries that constitute the main source of anxiety in the Gothic, and comprise the pivot of the horror in *Carmilla*. In Eugenia DeLamotte's words, there are three kinds of boundaries: those "that shut the protagonist off from the world, those that shut the protagonist in, and those that separate the individual self from something that is Other" (19). The monster "function[s] as dialectical Other . . . an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (Cohen 7), and its existence reaffirms the boundaries of what is "self". However, the danger of the monster lies in its contempt for that limit, its defiance for that simple classification. As Barbara Creed indicates, in the "construction of the monstrous in the horror film, that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (49). Transgression is thus the mark of the monster, which reveals itself in its disregard of its "proper" position.

1.2. The Monster in-between: Liminality and the Construction of the Abject.

From the anxiety about boundaries, another fear emerges, that of the undefinable, that which is neither Self nor Other, but something in between, a composite. As Jeffrey Cohen indicates, the monster can reside on the very border of difference as a creature of "ontological liminality" (6), which upsets systems of hierarchies with its very existence, as we shall see later when discussing the liminal position occupied by the female protagonists of *Carmilla*. The concept of liminality is described by Victor Turner as the state which pertains to the second phase of the process of a rite of passage, preceded by a separation from an earlier position in the social structure, and finalised when the ritual subject is reincorporated to the system and expected to behave according to its norms (94–95). These subjects, "liminal *personae*" (95), are ambiguous and anonymous in their position outside the system, as they "slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 95). In the non-structured spaces of liminality, Turner argues, individuals are undifferentiated, and thus hierarchical positions are reversed or completely discarded. This process is meant to reveal an "essential and generic" (97) social bond that emerges when structures are eliminated, what Turner calls "communitas" (96–99). This type of social relationship, different to the "normal" model of society as a "structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system" (Turner 96), enables people to relate to others in a more profound way, unconditioned by status markers. In this sense, liminality has the ability to upturn society's stability and rework the hierarchisation of difference before the stage of reincorporation occurs.

Likewise, Homi Bhabha indicates that times of change and liberation are characterised by "cultural uncertainty, and . . . representational undecidability" (51). Bhabha proposes the existence of a "Third Space" which emerges as the conflictive site of the enunciation of cultural difference, and "makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process" (54). Cultural difference is a process of signification, by means of which cultural authorities depend on an o/Other to define their own supremacy. The Third Space and the individuals who inhabit it, by virtue of their indeterminacy, "destroy this mirror of representation" (Bhabha 54) and bring into question the binary logic through which identities of difference are conceived, preventing "identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (5). The ambivalence of the Third Space, then, interrogates the very foundations of identity in cultural discourses based on Cartesian dichotomies. In the Gothic genre, these liminal states appear when the social order has been upset. In their in-betweenness, they become likened to abjection, as becomes evident in the symbology of liminality that Turner enumerates: "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (95).

In Gothic fiction, the monster can appear as a representation of diverse cultural concerns and fears, and we can read "cultures from the monsters they engender" (Cohen 3). The monster simultaneously embodies the different anxieties of a society, which feed into each other to form one single grotesque body. What we fear finds expression in images of the abject, which "can be experienced in various ways – one of which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy" (Creed 47). Firstly, we find those anxieties that relate to the body, which manifest in "an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrifying flesh" (Creed 48), the abject refuse that is expelled so that "I" can continue existing. Corporal anxieties find their primary symbol in the corpse, "the most sickening of wastes, . . . a border that has encroached upon everything . . . death infecting life" (Kristeva 3–4). Like the vampire, which represents death trespassing into the land of the living, the monstrous is often constructed in association with physical abjection. Secondly, in Gothic texts abjection can be related to the symbolic order. The abject is what "disturbs identity, system, order . . . The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor" (Kristeva 4). As previously mentioned, what crosses the limit of the acceptable is deemed monstrous, and, consequently, "the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith" (Cohen 11). Feminine monsters and monstrous genders are an attempt "to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an imaginary 'other' which must be repressed and controlled" (Creed 70). The female subject is turned abject in a patriarchal discourse troubled by her ambiguity and preoccupied with the constitution and maintenance of proper limits in what concerns gender identity and sexual difference.

1.3. The Defining Power of the Gaze and its Potential for Subversion.

An examination of the use of the gaze will aid in the articulation of the relationship between female sexuality and monstrosity in the two texts that are the object the following analysis. According to John Berger, seeing "establishes our place in the surrounding world"

(7), and the ways in which we look or are looked at determine how we interact with it. In consequence, the manner in which different forms of looking are configured in our current society and are represented artistically can reflect power imbalances between binary genders. Berger indicates that, in art, men have traditionally been the subjects of the act of looking, while women have been its objects. Gender differences are thus coded into the gaze, just as they are into sexual expressions. In film, Laura Mulvey argues, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (11), and women exist as a form of spectacle, "displayed as a sexual object" (11) for the benefit of the male protagonist and the 'ideal' spectator, who is assumed to be male. Women, therefore, exist on screen only to be looked at, and their daring to gaze back is consequently construed as an act of transgression.

Linda Williams has considered the possibility of the existence of a female gaze – specifically in the case of horror films – and she argues that looking is correlated with an active expression of desire, which makes the woman monstrous within the narrative. The gaze of the female protagonists of monster films is not liberating, as it results in punishment in narratives which "transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (Williams 85). This penalisation takes different forms. In the first place, the heroine looking at the monster allows the latter to entrance her and control her through her own gaze (Williams 86). The heroine's own desire is her undoing, for it attracts her to the monster, and, in looking, she becomes a victim. Yet, when the woman's look and her curiosity uncover the monstrous, she is not allowed the distance and the pleasure of the male voyeur, "as if she has become responsible for the horror that her look reveals" (86). Instead, she recognises the existence of a connection between the monster and herself, their shared exhibitionist role as "two objects of the cinematic spectacle who encounter one another in this look" (87). The monster serves as a mirror, and she cannot distance herself from its monstrosity because she sees it as a reflection—albeit a distorted one—of her own self. Nevertheless, that recognition of the difference they both embody can also indicate a potential for empowerment. As Mulvey contends, to a male subject moulded by patriarchal discourse, the female image can be threatening as well as pleasurable because, in psychoanalytic terms, "she also connotes her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (13). The figure of the woman, however, does not only constitute an absence: like the monster's body, it can "suggest a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack . . . for, looked at from the woman's perspective, the monster is not so much lacking as he is powerful in a different way" (Williams 87–89). In her looking at the monster, the heroine perceives their similarities in the abnormality of their desires and of their sexual difference that makes them both Other. The woman's gaze reveals how both can be a threat to male order, yet Williams does not consider this look subversive, as the heroine still only sees what she represents for men. Ellis Hanson, on the contrary, believes that the male gaze can be appropriated and made subversive by being used as an expression of lesbian desire, which exists outside the patriarchal system and therefore acts as a "destabilising force" (184).

In my examination of the gaze in both texts, I will make use of the concept of "ocularisation," as defined by his coiner François Jost. Although a filmic term in origin, its use can extend to literary analysis as well, due to the fact that the term "focalisation" is not precise enough, as it does not differentiate between who "sees" and who "knows". While "focalisation"

retains its sense of cognitive perspective, Jost proposes the term "ocularisation" for the actual point of *view*, "the virtual looking position" (76). As I concern myself with the analysis of the gaze, I believe this distinction to be relevant. In films, ocularisation refers to "the relation between what the camera shows and what the characters are presumed to be seeing" (74). The shot can correspond to the regard of a character, and thus be internal to the diegesis, or it may not belong to anyone in particular. If the camera suggests the gaze of a character through the way the image is constructed, such as its deformation, low angle, shaking, or framing to suggest binoculars, we find an instance of primary internal ocularisation. In a literary text, this point of view corresponds to a first-person narrator, which in cinema need not coincide with the observer. We find a case of secondary internal ocularisation when the subjective perspective is implied through editing, which may suggest a specific point of view by, for example, aligning the shot with a character's eyeline, or by juxtaposing a close-up of a character with one of the object of their gaze. In literature, it refers to a description that corresponds to the vision of a character who is not the narrator. If the shot or description is not anchored in the look of any specific character, then we have zero ocularisation (Jost 76). Thus, we find a transfer of perspectives and concepts from filmic studies to literary criticism that changes our way of looking at literature. This reciprocity is also found in the transtextual relationship between the novella *Carmilla* and its filmic adaptation, which I will trace in the following analysis in accordance with the principles laid out by Robert Stam. According to this approach, the focus of the analysis should be on the relation of hypertextuality, the dialogue between the "hypertext," the adaptation, and the preceding text or "hypotext," "which the former transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends" (Stam 31).

2. Revisiting vampires: A Comparative Analysis.

1.1. Transgression: (Dis)regarding boundaries.

In *Carmilla*, monstrosity emerges in the form of transgression of established boundaries, and it is employed in the construction of an Other, against which the self – and the system – can reassert itself. In both texts, the character of Carmilla appears to invert the position of women in the symbolic order, and she, therefore, stands out as the most obviously transgressive character. Her existence threatens the masculine and feminine categories on which the system relies in order to remain stable. Carmilla is not a passive lover, but an active, even aggressive one, a role she claims for herself with her uninhibited stare and a sexuality outside the control of men. The latter, in fact, are clueless as to her seduction of Laura for most of the novella, and they are almost entirely absent in the film. In Le Fanu's story, Laura repeatedly notes how Carmilla looks at her with passion, "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" (Le Fanu 25), and references to her eyes invariably appear along allusions to Carmilla's passion. She usurps the position of the male and his active gaze, and therefore appropriates his power as well. She even takes dominion over women, claiming the type of "ownership" of the female partner that, according to patriarchy, belongs to men: "You

are mine, you shall be mine," (26) she tells Laura, taking her away from the male sphere of control and under hers. This aggressiveness appears so unnatural to Laura that she considers the possibility of Carmilla being a boy in disguise.

In Harris's film, too, Carmilla actively pursues her desire, which is consummated more explicitly than in the novella. Carmilla's very appearance suggests an archetypal female monster: she is beautiful in a feline way, much less innocent-looking than in Le Fanu's story – where she is described as pretty and sweet – and her long, loose, auburn hair gives her the semblance of a Lilith. Carmilla's hair had already been described in the novella as very dark – unlike Laura's golden hair – and "magnificently thick" (23), but in the film, the character's licentiousness is emphasised through the change of colour to red, and her reticence to ever wear her hair up (see fig. 1). Carmilla's usurpation of male authority in Lara's life begins early in the film, as Lara's father unexpectedly leaves the domestic sphere soon after Carmilla arrives. As it happens with Laura in Le Fanu's text, Carmilla's dominating attitude seduces Lara, the former gaining control over the latter to a degree that exceeds any other influence in the household. This culminates when she steals Lara away from her oppressive home, literally transgressing the limits of social space. They are subsequently tracked down and Carmilla killed in an attempt to restore social order.

Fig. 1. Lara has climbed a tree alongside the more sensuous and feline Carmilla (42:52).

Nevertheless, Laura/Lara is not simply a victim. If we follow the dichotomy Dijkstra considers to be the result of the Victorian dualistic male view of women, "the virgin and the whore; the saint and the vampire" (334), we find that neither of the two characters can be reduced to one of the extremes. Laura is far from a saint: endowed with a sexual desire of her own, she expresses her urges mainly through her insatiable gaze. She is the first-person narrator of the novella; consequently, she provides the narrative action with constant primary internal ocularisation, in Jost's terms. Except for the prologue, the entire narrative is filtered through her eyes. Similarly, the film uses internal ocularisation, both primary and secondary, to align the camera with what Lara sees. In both instances, this act of looking is construed as transgressive in two ways: as immoderate curiosity and as desire. Indeed, Laura/Lara is dominated by her inquisitive nature, which often attracts her to danger.

In the novella, Laura's curiosity is set against an atmosphere of prohibition in which women, especially young ones, are expected to stay innocent and ignorant of evil. In the letter Laura's father receives at the beginning of the novella, General Spielsdorf recounts his daughter Bertha's death at the hands of a vampire, and expresses gratitude for the fact that she "died without a suspicion of the cause of her sufferings. She is gone without so much as conjecturing the nature of her illness, and the accursed passion of the agent of all this misery" (Le Fanu 8). Later in the narrative, Laura will also be excluded from her father's and the doctor's conjectures regarding her own health, the former condescendingly stating that "[she is] not to trouble [her] head about it" (59). Men define themselves as keepers of knowledge, and defenders of the innocence of young women. In this context, Laura's search for answers and her constant prying threatens the authority of the men, who wield knowledge as a form of power. Lara's curiosity in the film also exceeds what is acceptable for her gender, as it verges on morbidity, in her clandestine study of anatomical and surgical models, and her insistent observation of insects and dead animals. However, it is not a male figure that guards that boundary: the delimitation of her access to knowledge is enforced by Lara's governess, Miss Fontaine. Knowledge belongs to the masculine sphere, as Miss Fontaine indicates when she reprimands Lara for taking books from her father's private library as they are not "for a young lady" (Harris 7:31). In the novella, men's absolute control is quite illusory, but it is so ingrained in their belief-system that they do not fear its being undermined until it is (almost) too late. On the contrary, Miss Fontaine, being a woman, needs to become a strict disciplinarian figure in order to maintain the authority she borrows from the patriarchal system by becoming subservient to it and upholding its interests. She perceives her control to be much more fragile than men's, and she resorts to corporal punishment and religious fear so as to maintain her authority.

In Laura/Lara's appropriation of knowledge another core aspect of transgression is involved, namely, violence. In Le Fanu's novella, curiosity is expressed several times in belligerent terms: Laura uses "tactics" to get answers from Carmilla, and questions are deemed an "attack" by her – "I did attack her more directly" (Le Fanu 24) – as well as by Carmilla's mother, who calls the General's interrogation a "point of attack" (67). While the General's pursuit of the Countess is natural, Laura's "aggression" defies her position in the heterosexual system, it is "ill-bred" (24), as she actively chases Carmilla and temporarily assumes the male role in the same way Carmilla does. Curiosity and lust are equated by Laura herself, as she states that "curiosity is a restless and unscrupulous passion" (23), and that inquisitiveness is associated to an exploration of sexuality, which becomes even more explicit in Lara's case. In Harris' film, Lara meets Carmilla while the former is stealing one of her father's anatomical books, and the desire that sparks in that first encounter is channelled into Lara's first dream, in which she sits atop a sleeping man, opens his shirt, and proceeds to dig her hands into his stomach following the diagrams in the book. Blood and violence become entangled with desire and curiosity, as Lara assumes the dominant position in the dream and penetrates the man. This dovetails into William Veeder's reading of Le Fanu's Laura as one who "feels sexual attraction so strongly that she becomes at times the aggressor" (207).

As mentioned earlier, the desire that blossoms between Lara and Carmilla is signalled, among other things, by their gazes. It is in that first encounter that Lara has her first primary

internal ocularisation, a sequence of frames that isolate Carmilla's face and seem to draw her closer to Lara (see fig.2). They are separated only by the flame of the candle Lara is holding, which comes to symbolise their passion. Carmilla returns that gaze, making their attraction mutual, and the act of looking turns disruptive of social and domestic order. When Lara sees Carmilla the next morning, she appears enraptured, barely even blinking, and Miss Fontaine begins to lose her command over her. Fontaine's loss of composure and of authority becomes apparent as the fly which she had carefully captured under a teacup escapes. Carmilla's appearance in the house disturbs the established order, but it is Lara's attraction towards her that facilitates this disruption. In Le Fanu's version, Laura's desire is also what allows her victimisation. As Williams indicates, the woman's gaze allows the monster to control her, utilising her desire against her. Carmilla's first attack occurs the night Laura places Mircalla's portrait in her room. Veeder argues that "hanging the portrait of Mircalla-Carmilla in her bedroom is so symptomatic of Laura's attempt to control passion by objectifying it" (208), but her endeavour fails because of the transgressive nature of her sexual attraction towards the woman in the painting. Unlike a male voyeur, Laura is not permitted the distance that creates scopophilic pleasure. Her looking precipitates her destruction, as it draws her into the power of the monster: "I was more lost in wonder the more I looked at the picture" (Le Fanu 35). Her attraction is not unrequited, as Laura notices that Carmilla was "gazing on me in contemplation, and she smiled in a kind of rapture" (35). Carmilla's sexual attraction towards Laura is expressed by her gaze, but it is Laura's returning the look that permits the consummation of that desire and her consequent destruction. Harris's story correlates desire and victimisation in a similar way, as Lara's unconscious clearly associates her act of looking with her own destruction, something that finds expression in her dreams. In her second dream, Lara sees herself being sawn in half by the man of the first dream, but, as she becomes the primary ocularisier, he turns into Carmilla, who suffocates her with a kiss. Her desire –

Fig. 2. Lara has primary ocularisation as she first encounters Carmilla *(34:47).*

especially towards a woman – expressed through the gaze, becomes a relinquishment of control to the monster, who is free to enact violence on the female victim. Desire, in the dream, gives way to horror as Lara allows herself to express it, as she fears her own destruction in Carmilla's hands.

In the face of their transgression, the necessity emerges to eliminate Carmilla and save Laura/Lara from her own desire, and thus reintegrate her in the symbolic order, in the polarised system whose boundaries they have threatened, by having her occupy, once again,

her “proper” position in it. Transgression, therefore, functions as the means to reaffirm those borders, as it “brings out the importance of limits in the act of exceeding them” (Botting 9). Transgression becomes a simple act of relocation within a rigid system, the crossing of a border between two dichotomous positions, Self and Other, and therefore a way of reasserting what is “self,” as well as of redefining boundaries through the execution of the monster. Female sexuality in Le Fanu’s novel appears in its most horrific form, as vampirism, as a negative counterpart to the sexual purity that men are attempting to maintain. The gaze appears once more as an instrument for identification, and therefore definition and delineation according to patriarchal rules. General Spielsdorf’s first attempt at killing Carmilla has him “peeping through the small crevice” (Le Fanu 81) of the door, as a voyeur spying on the intimate encounter between Carmilla and Bertha. Carmilla appears to him in her most unappealing form, as a “great palpitating mass” (81), allowing him to define her, who until then was believed to be a beautiful innocent girl, as a monster to be destroyed. It is a group of men who finally kill her following the law, and thus inscribing themselves further into the system that Carmilla had threatened.

Harris’s film, on the other hand, no longer relies on men to uphold the system – as they mostly disappear from the picture – and, instead, has a woman as the executioner. As mentioned earlier, despite her position of authority, Miss Fontaine continues to be subservient to Lara’s father and the doctor, and is therefore still inscribed in the patriarchal system through her efforts to uphold it. Like the men in Le Fanu’s text, she views Carmilla’s execution as a way of reinforcing rigid boundaries, the need for which transgression has made apparent. The film constructs Carmilla as a monster through Miss Fontaine’s gaze, which identifies an absolute Other to be destroyed. Like the spectator, she recognises Carmilla’s connection with the abject in the form of disease, sexual depravity, violence, blood, and heresy. Despite Carmilla’s actual identity being unclear, the film’s hypertextual relation to the novella makes the identification of Carmilla as a vampire possible for the spectator. The viewer’s gaze identifies temporarily with Miss Fontaine’s, around whose looking and fear the tension grows. However, Carmilla is never fully revealed to be a vampire, and the film thus brings to the fore the fundamental source of anxiety that motivates Miss Fontaine’s murder: transgressive sexuality and its assaulting the “proper” limits of womanhood. As Botting indicates, in recent Gothic narratives “oppositions are inverted, polarisations reversed” (172), and Harris strips Carmilla of any explicit vampirism so as to reveal the instability of the patriarchal boundaries that are threatened by her – and Lara’s – active sexuality. The execution of Carmilla in both texts, then, constitutes an attempt to reaffirm the limits of the acceptable and situate everyone in their proper place in the symbolic order.

2.2. The Liminal: Indefinability and Redefinition.

In a patriarchal social order, difference is based on a system of dichotomies, and transgression is assumed to be a binary issue by the executioners. However, in the monster’s refusal to remain in the position assigned to it, the outcome is not necessarily its integration in the system, and instability and liminality emerge as part of the very ontological essence of monstrosity in both texts. It follows that monstrosity is not exorcised through its physical

destruction. Carmilla and Laura/Lara have a liminal nature which complicates the situation, as they occupy an alternative, parasystemic "Third Space," which is not fixed and is, therefore, elusive. The negotiation of self-identity is a fundamental part of the story not only for Laura/Lara, but also for Carmilla, and it occurs in a space of in-betweenness, in the interstitial areas between the dichotomous positions established by the patriarchal system and into which they do not quite fit.

Carmilla is an ultimately ambiguous and liminal character because she has an indeterminate identity and can navigate and alternate between different aspects of herself. In Le Fanu's story, she integrates both humanity and abomination in her person in the same way that, as a vampire, she is neither fully dead nor fully alive, but is stranded somewhere in the middle. She is initially presented as "the prettiest girl [she] ever saw; about [Laura's] age, and so gentle and nice" (Le Fanu 16), with a beauty and innocent air that assuages every anxiety regarding her unconventional arrival; yet, she can also appear overtly sinister after a "horrible transformation" (82) that turns her into what Laura can only describe as a "writhing fiend" (91). She cannot be said to be fully monstrous for she allows glimpses of her humanity to be seen at times, and can be perceived as a victim as well as an assailant. She was attacked by an unknown vampire in her youth, "all but assassinated in [her] bed" (41), and her vulnerability is perceived by Laura even in Carmilla's most horrific form, as she continues to call her a "girl," and speaks of "her tiny grasp" (82) even when she demonstrates a supernatural strength, in a paradoxical image that suggests a simultaneity of her identities. What makes Carmilla abject is this inconsistency, as she cannot be fully classified and appears as a composite and thus as a traitor which is not what it appears to be, something which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). Her polymorphous nature cannot be reduced to one of its expressions; she is that "palpitating mass" (Le Fanu 81) that General Spielsdorf sees, that is to say, essentially fluid. The letters of her name are the only stable aspect of her person, the core part of her identity, but in her use of anagrams, it still appears as shifting and adaptable.

In Harris's film, Carmilla is more solid, less physically mouldable, and clearly perceived as such because she is played by an actor whose appearance remains constant. Yet, her identity is equally undefined. Carmilla arrives mysteriously, without a single companion to provide a clue regarding her origins. After her carriage crashes, she is brought into the house in the dark, and she first appears in bed in her nightgown, stripped of any piece of clothing that could hint towards her social status. Moreover, she refuses to say or cannot remember who she is. The narrative itself becomes ambiguous, introducing red herrings that point towards a vampiric nature that the spectator can recognise with the hypotextual *Carmilla* novella in mind, but which can ultimately be discarded when Lara proves her humanity by handing her a cross. However, Carmilla's perplexing behaviour and unknown nature, Lara's illness, and the ubiquitous presence of blood seem to accumulate in what cannot be interpreted as mere coincidence. A tension emerges between the two readings of Carmilla's character, and the viewer's projected identification is forced to reside uncomfortably in the overlap between the two, the conventional vampire and the unconventional human; or to find itself divided between them, with no possibility of an easy resolution, for Carmilla's liminal existence brings into question the very boundaries that distinguish humanity from monstrosity.

Carmilla's fluidity is associated with physical liminality and thresholds, as it is in these spaces where her identity is often explored. Her arrival occurs under the moonlight, in a scene in which the language of in-betweenness abounds:

> At the right the same road crosses the steep and picturesque bridge . . . Over the sward and low grounds a thin film of mist was stealing like smoke, marking the distances with a transparent veil; and here and there we could see the river faintly flashing in the moonlight . . . Nothing could disturb the character of profound serenity, and the enchanted glory and vagueness of the prospect. (Le Fanu 9)

The most distinguishable features of the landscape are the sites of crossing, what is neither here nor there. The bridge appears as a literal threshold, but the fog also suggests the idea of a "transparent veil," which acts both as a disguise and as a boundary. The moonlight, in between the darkness of night and the light of day, accentuates this liminality and associates it with female activity. The "full moon in such a state of brilliancy" (10) is said to indicate "a special spiritual activity" (10) by Mademoiselle de la Fontaine, as it affects both dreams and reality, and the dead and the alive alike, blurring the boundaries between those categories. Laura remarks upon the "vagueness" and ambiguity of the setting, which enchants her as much as it disturbs her father. It is during this liminal moment, when boundaries are at their most unstable, that Carmilla arrives. Her carriage crashes just as it "had passed the summit of the steep bridge" (11), and the crossing is disrupted, signalling the position she is to maintain for the remainder of the novella: a permanent state of transitoriness and liminality. Carmilla continues to be associated with thresholds, since it is "under a narrow, arched doorway" (82) where, in the end, she undergoes an "instantaneous and horrible transformation" (82) which reveals her true – or, possibly, alternative – identity. It is in those in-between spaces that her polymorphous nature visibly manifests. In Harris's film, Carmilla is similarly associated with physical thresholds, although her liminality is expressed as a resistance against boundaries. She questions the positions that are assigned to her, and her first words, "Why is your family keeping me in that room?" (Harris 34:35), challenge the boundaries that Laura's family is attempting to impose on her. In the same way that the castle in Le Fanu's story is construed as a traditional and patriarchal space, different from the ruined building Carmilla inhabits, the house in the film is a constrictive space, a tangible encasement for the social category assigned to them as women. Carmilla is literally locked inside her room towards the end, and her escape along with Lara signifies their rejection of that classification. The boundary is breached, and the open door they leave behind as they escape creates a sense of incompleteness in the binary classifications, and becomes a gate through which positions can be altered, and the self renegotiated in a new, subversive space. This space is evasive, its limits hidden by the mist that surrounds them as they walk, and in this liminality Carmilla creates an alternative existence for herself and Lara. Consequently, in both texts Carmilla's identity is not just located outside the system but beyond it, and is, ultimately, unclassifiable.

As we have seen, Carmilla is mouldable and adaptable, and Laura/Lara, with her insatiable curiosity, strives to find her own identity, and through her gaze finds a mirror in Carmilla. The gaze appears once again as a tool for identification, yet, in this case, the woman and the monster "encounter each other in this look" (Williams 87). Although the recognition of

their similarity can be undesirable, it has the potential to be subversive, as instead of objectifying women, that gaze allows them to find power in self-identification as Other. Laura/Lara sees reflected in Carmilla an ability to disrupt the social order that she, then, recognises in herself as well. For Laura/Lara, Carmilla's ambiguity is the opposite of the narrow and oppressive position assigned to her as a woman. In the novella, Carmilla offers herself as a mirror in her use of mimicry throughout the story. She is quick to ingratiate herself to Laura by expressing what Laura is feeling from the very first moment that they meet in adulthood: "'How wonderful!' she exclaimed. 'Twelve years ago, I saw your face in a dream, and it has haunted me ever since'" (Le Fanu 19). She repeatedly articulates the same concerns that trouble Laura – "If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you" (21) – and thus situates herself in the same position. Laura, therefore, sees her own double in Carmilla; her paroxysms of passion are an amplification of the feelings Laura represses. In turn, Laura also starts to imitate Carmilla, adopting her practices, such as "Carmilla's habit of locking her bedroom door" (42). They begin to find their own selves through the o/Other, through a double that becomes a mirror. Harris's *Carmilla*, similarly, emphasises Lara's desire to know herself through the use of mirrors and reflections, on which she lingers (03:56; 12:33) (see fig. 3). Carmilla's indeterminacy is perfect for Lara, as it allows her to make anything she wants of her identity, unencumbered by the expectations of society. In the first scene in which they meet, and in a shot in which Lara is the primary ocularisor, she gives Carmilla her name. Lara's act of naming Carmilla can be seen as her attempt to define her through her subjective gaze, encapsulate her, so as to assert her own self in relation to hers. Carmilla offers her that opportunity, consequently enabling that reciprocity of identification. Lara, then, finds a mirror

Fig. 3. Lara observes her own reflection in the water (12:33).

image in Carmilla that is, nevertheless, somewhat distorted, as Carmilla appears as her less restrained *doppelgänger*, who shares her desires for freedom and sexual exploration, but is also more daring. In the two texts, their gazes become a subversive instrument to redefine themselves away from the position that has been imposed on them.

Nevertheless, that interplay of identification results in a gradual blending of self and other in a Third Space of in-betweenness, as the two mirror and try to define each other simultaneously. This fusion becomes apparent in the ambiguous space of dreams, in which social norms do not operate, and sexual attraction finds boundless expression. In the novella,

it is through dreams that Carmilla preys on Laura, in what is conceived as an alternate reality, isolated from the one dominated by men. The space that Carmilla constructs becomes a realm of secret desires and exploration that does not adhere to the limits prescribed to women: “dreams come through stone walls . . . and their persons make their exits and their entrances as they please, and laugh at locksmiths” (Le Fanu 46). Water is the recurring element of Laura’s dreams, which meander away, in ever-flowing discourse like “the current of a river” (51), as does her sense of selfhood.

In the same way, in the film dreams emerge as a liminal space, and even the border between reality and dream is obscured. Over-exposure and blurred lights often give the film a strange, fantastic atmosphere, which is very apparent in the scene in which Lara meets Carmilla. The overpowering light of the seemingly floating candle, and the darkness from which Carmilla emerges give the scene a certain oneiric quality. This is further accentuated by the lack of transition to Lara’s actual dream; the whole event might be assumed to have been conjured up by Lara’s imagination, except for the fact that the next morning Carmilla uses the name Lara has given her. It becomes difficult to draw the line between what is real and what is dream, and Laura’s sexual desire and violent impulses, initially only conspicuous in the dreams, begin to infuse her real life, as she actively pursues Carmilla and bites a man’s hand so hard that it bleeds. In both texts, it is in those in-between spaces that the differences between the two girls also begin to disappear; as Auerbach indicates, “in the flow of female dreams . . . women in *Carmilla* merge into a union the men who watch them never see” (43). The difference between human and monster ceases to matter in this space as transgressive desire is shared by both parties, and there is no heterosexual polarisation of man and woman. Instead, Carmilla and Laura/Lara find that, in the reciprocity of their gaze, they mirror each other, and are thus same and different, One and Other at the same time.

Fig. 4. Lara's reflection becomes Carmilla's image as the water ripples (1:30:32).

Laura/Lara’s stance is not as straightforward as Carmilla’s, who desires the fusion, or Fontaine’s and the men’s, who wholly reject it and destroy the monster, for Laura/Lara oscillates between self-affirmation in opposition to the Other, and an undesired and troubled identification with it. Laura/Lara’s struggle in the stories is mainly one of self-understanding. However, in their approach to Carmilla as a mirror, both Laura and Lara encounter a distorted image in Carmilla, a monstrous one, with which identification is abominable, especially for

Laura, who attempts to distance herself from it. According to Veeder, "Laura is an unreliable narrator, not because she consciously fabricates, but because she unconsciously represses" (200). She appears extremely obtuse in her inability to comprehend the events in the abandoned church, even after the General's story, because recognising Carmilla's monstrosity would be akin to admitting her own, and accepting her as the mirror image that her gaze reveals. In the film, Lara finds herself divided between accepting and rejecting Carmilla as a mirror; she is literally sawn in half in her dream, symbolising her dual nature, the two extremes fighting in her. Lara, however, lacks Laura's repression, which enables her to accept the monstrosity that she sees in Carmilla, and literally run away with it; as she leaves the open door behind, through the mist, Lara reformulates her own identity, and assumes the same position as Carmilla. Her reflection, at the end of the film, fully becomes Carmilla's image (see fig. 4), signalling her acceptance of her own socially configured Otherness and monstrosity.

The two characters, Laura and Lara, meet very different conclusions: Laura reaches an impasse in her search for identity, caught between the identity she has discovered in the mirror of Carmilla and her rejection of the knowledge she has gained. Harris, however, grants her protagonist the understanding necessary to fully grow into herself. Yet, neither has a defined identity, and therefore they cannot be reintegrated in the kinship system; they both go on to exist in an interstitial space. Laura cannot fully recognise Carmilla as a monster, and therefore neither form of self-understanding, by opposition or by identification, succeeds. Her search for identity is not complete, and thus hers is not a momentary stage of liminality, but a complete displacement of her selfhood. Reversing to her previous status is also impossible, as too much of Carmilla has become part of herself. Indeed, the main reason why Carmilla's presence cannot be fully exorcised via the staking is that she continues to live through Laura/Lara. Carmilla's influence is not easily erased: "One sign of the vampire is the power of the hand . . . it leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from" (Le Fanu 91). It is not just her hand that has the strength to maintain its grip after she is gone, but her whole presence that remains with Laura. Carmilla still exerts power over her because she is part of her, and because Laura coinhabits Carmilla's liminal space, in which she fancies she sometimes hears "the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door" (91), at the threshold, just about to return and make her presence apparent. Lara, on the other hand, even after she accepts her own monstrosity, discovers herself to be as ambiguous a character as Carmilla. Their presence in each other, symbolised by their exchange of blood, entails a continuance of their liminality, as Lara cannot be easily discerned as a separate person. In the last scene, her now polymorphous nature is revealed, as the ripples of the stone she throws into the lake – while wearing Carmilla's dress – transform her likeness into Carmilla's image. Like the water, Lara has become fluid, and therefore she assumes her new position in the system, neither fully integrated nor completely Other, but in a Third Space of her own.

3. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a comparative analysis of J.S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) and Emily Harris's 2019 adaptation. This juxtaposed reading has shown that both texts have

a similar approach to the matter of gender and sexuality, even if Harris's reworking is more explicit in the depiction of transgression and engages with the more ambiguous and liminal aspects of *Carmilla* in order to underscore its political message.

Monstrosity in both texts is a negotiation of positions and identities that takes place as a transgression of the boundaries that delineate what is Self and what is Other, and, in particular, those boundaries that define female difference and regulate "proper" female sexuality. That negotiation, however, is not limited to the binary system on which the patriarchal system is founded, and the liminal process that starts with Carmilla's arrival becomes a permanent state for her and Laura/Lara. The subversive space of liminality brings into question the hierarchies that exist in society and which transgression has made evident, and it becomes a site of contestation of the meaning of difference, and of the way in which it is allowed to exist in society. Ultimately, Otherness is displaced as a meaningful category, challenging the binary on which the system is founded. For Laura, this displacement is quite precarious, as, in her repression, she does not allow herself to accept her position or take any action. However, the liminality of the space she now inhabits is subversive *per se* despite her passivity, and Le Fanu's text suggests that the ambiguity born out of the relation between Carmilla and Laura encompasses various possibilities for the upturning of social order, for it is conceived as a blank slate on which society might be remodelled. Yet, Laura's fear prevents its exploration, and in her passive indeterminacy she appears more likely to fade away into the interstices than to become an agent of change. The liminal process somewhat pessimistically ends in her death, as we learn in the prologue, although it has been suggested by critics like Elizabeth Signorotti that her demise while under the sustained influence of Carmilla suggests a possible posterior transformation into a vampire, by virtue of which she would acquire the same active power that Carmilla possessed. Laura's fate therefore remains ambiguous.

In contrast, in making Carmilla and Lara's relationship explicit, Harris's film takes a feminist approach and more clearly denounces the construction of female sexuality as difference, as she confounds the definitions not only of womanhood, but also of monsterhood and humanity. Lara, unlike Laura, embraces her newly developed indeterminacy and wields it as the key to her freedom to be anyone, thus taking an active stance and assuming Carmilla's role. She has uncovered the violence of the patriarchal system, and appears ready to contest its hierarchal organisation. Nevertheless, as the film ends at that point, the resolution is incomplete, even though it seems more likely than it does in the novella. The liminal process is not carried to term in either text, as oppression does not end, and new moral values are not introduced. The characters, therefore, remain in an in-between state that prevents them from being reincorporated into society or creating a fully separate system of their own. As there is not a complete change in the distribution of power and in the way in which it is enforced on women, liminality is not a transitory process for Laura/Lara, becoming, instead, a permanent condition of resistance.

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Bioprofile of the author:

Guacimara Larrad is a graduate in English Studies from the University of the Basque Country, who is currently pursuing a Master’s Degree in Literary Studies at the Complutense University of Madrid. Her academic interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century literature in English, women’s fiction, the fantastic and gothic genres, and post-digital literature.

Contact: <glarrad@ucm.es>