

HOMOEROTIC VAMPIRISM IN “GOBLIN MARKET” AND *CARMILLA*

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Stories of vampirism have always been inherently erotic. The image of a mysterious, dark and brooding figure preying on youthful innocence captivates its audience, seducing them into stories about the alluring creatures whose beauty is enticing and otherworldly. Vampires have also been linked to sexual perversions and deviance, such as homosexuality. This idea of vampires has persisted for over a century, with many tracing the origins of the popular vampire to “The Vampyre” (1816) by John William Polidori. A slew of famous vampire works in the Victorian era followed, such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Even more prominent than literal vampirism was the inclusion of figurative vampirism, such as in the long poem “Goblin Market” (1862) coincidentally written by Polidori’s niece, Christina Georgina Rossetti. In both cases, vampirism serves as a metaphor for homosexual desire, imbuing the texts with a monstrous tone. Not only that, but many of these relationships also turned out to be incestuous. Both “Goblin Market” and *Carmilla* are known for their incestuous, homosexual undertones, and the literal and figurative vampirism employed only serve to enhance these further; this shift from figurative to literal coincides with changes to the naming and regulation of homosexuality in Victorian society, as described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*.

Lizzie and Laura from “Goblin Market” serve as an example for homoerotic vampirism despite not being literal vampires or being in an open homosexual relationship. The

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text makes it clear that Laura and Lizzie have more than a typical sister relationship, and the sexual language Rossetti uses only furthers this conclusion. “Goblin Market” is a tale decrying heterosexual desire and eating “the forbidden fruit.” However, it takes a different approach to the homosexual. Lizzie and Laura live together by themselves, perfectly domestic in every way. When Laura hears the cries of the goblins selling their luscious fruit, she indulges and consumes some after her sister warns against it. She drinks their liquids in a very erotic manner after using a lock of her hair to pay, a metaphor for her virginity. She:

suck'd their fruit globes fair or red:
Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flow'd that juice;
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?
She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore;¹

The scene in question portrays Laura as a ravenous creature akin to a vampire, sucking the juice from the fruits. The liquid starts as sweet honey, before changing to an intoxicating wine before finally transforming into water, or basic sustenance Laura needs to survive. She begins as curious, to riding a high, to addicted to the substance. Rossetti builds on the mythos Polidori established, and “the implications of pleasure, pain, sucking and enervation suggest some sort of

¹ Rossetti, Christina. “Goblin Market.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, the Victorian Age*, by Stephen Greenblatt, W.W. Norton & Co., 2012, pp. 1497–1508, lines 128-136.

vampirism, however muted and altered.”² By consuming the fluids, Laura has transformed into a vampire.

She has also become impure in the process, tasting the forbidden fruit and gaining heterosexual awareness. Like Adam and Eve, she receives knowledge from the fruit she ingests, if only of a more bodily variety. Having tasted the fruit, and losing her purity in the process, she longs for it. However, now that Laura has tasted the produce, the goblins are no longer interested in selling her their wares, and she can no longer hear their call, while Lizzie still can. The goblins want nothing to do with the girl whose virtue they sullied, which seemingly warns against heterosexual premarital sex. Female sexual desirability is expendable while male sexual desirability is durable and increasing in power with activity. Laura slowly wastes away, the fruit having sapped her of her youth and innocence. Lizzie is able to do nothing but look on in horror as her beloved sister deteriorates.

Lizzie’s refusal to participate in heterosexual activity by rejecting the goblins’ fruits marks the majority of the next passage. Lizzie decides to get more fruit from the goblins to heal her sister, without partaking in any herself. While the fruits are luscious and tempting, the goblin men themselves are decidedly less so. John H. Flannigan notes, “the only men in the poem are goblins who appear in various animal shapes, from cats to wombats, and who coo like doves.”³ These animals are associated with the phallus, and they are meant to be revolting to both Lizzie and the reader.⁴ The goblins are said to be “leering” at each other at one point, creating the image of repulsive lustfulness (Rossetti l. 93), and “their looks were evil” (Rossetti l. 397). Their animalistic nature is revolting and

² Morrill, David F. ““Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens”: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in “Goblin Market.”” *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 1 (1990): 1-16, 2.

³ Flannigan, John H. “Issues of Gender and Lesbian Love: Goblins in ‘The Garden Lodge.’” *Cather Studies* 2 (1993): 23–40, 28.

⁴ Morrill, “Twilight is not Good for Maidens,” 5.

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uncivilized. When the goblins invite Lizzie to have some of the fruit, she replies, "Thank you, but one waits/ at home alone for me" (Rossetti l. 383-384), obviously referring to her sister. She is not interested in heterosexual activity, and she desires to return to her sister. The goblins then try to force her to eat the produce, attempting to open her mouth, but she stands resolute. They attack her in a scene resembling a sexual assault:

Though the goblins cuff'd and caught her,
Coax'd and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink,
Kick'd and knock'd her,
Maul'd and mock'd her, (Rossetti 424-429)

The above scene occurs as the goblins are trying to shove their liquids down her throat, a reference to semen. Lizzie never gives in and finally they abandon their "fruitless" endeavor. She stumbles home, calling to Laura:

"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;" (Rossetti l. 465-472)

Lizzie begs Laura to kiss her and drink her nectars, similar to a vampire sucking blood. Vampires suck the life force from the innocent youth in order to maintain their own youthful vitality so that they never age. Laura's loss of the goblin fruits has aged her beyond her years, making her hair turn gray and her body become less vital, which she can only gain back if she sucks the juice off of Lizzie's body. There is also "the idea of the vampire as a specter of the dead that feeds

upon its own family.”⁵ Lizzie asks Laura to eat her and drink her and love her, tying consumption with desire and sexuality, as well as family. This merges sexuality with nurture and sustenance, such as a mother breastfeeding, which ties breasts and sexuality with nourishment. Laura later, “Kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth” (Rossetti l. 492). She is consuming the liquid off the skin of her sister, shifting a familial relationship into that of a sexual nature. Sucking, a word commonly associated with the vampire myth, is used heavily throughout the story, the juice being used as a substitute for blood, as it is the “blood” of the fruit.⁶ Laura regains her youth after sucking the blood off of her sister’s body, a vampire feeding off of her lover.

Consumption of the juices is eroticized, but incorporation of the nutrients is curative. In Victorian society, there was a correlation between love and digestion, with phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler writing, “All can eat several times more, and digest it, too, when in Love than when not.”⁷ Love supposedly made food taste better and cured digestive illnesses. Women especially were supposed to prepare food for their family with love. This transfers to Lizzie’s gathering of the fruit for Laura. The way Laura eats the fruit is suggestive, and it ties emotional and erotic desire to consumption and sustenance. Theoretically, a vampire is someone who feeds off the life others, which is exactly what Laura does where she sucks the pulp off of Lizzie’s body. She is then able to digest

⁵ Leal, Amy. “Unnameable Desires in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*.” *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 55, no. 1 (March 2007): 37–52, 39.

⁶ Morrill, “Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens,” 5.

⁷ Fowler, O. S. *Creative and Sexual Science: or, Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations ; Love, Its Laws, Power, Etc ... Courtship, Married Life, and Perfect Children ; Their Hereditary Endowment ... Etc. as Taught by Phrenology and Physiology*. Home Pub. Co., 1875, 263.

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the fruit. The fruit Lizzie offers Laura through love cures her of her illness.

However, the fruit does not taste as it once did. "It was wormwood on her tongue" (Rossetti l. 494). As the fruit is equivalent to heterosexuality, Laura is unable to stomach the thought of it any longer. Laura can no longer participate in heterosexual desire. What once was delicious and so alluring is now vile and disgusting. She "loathed the feast" (Rossetti l. 495) but continues to gorge herself anyways, despite not enjoying it at all. The fruit not only serves as a metaphor for heterosexual relations, but also for liquids, such as semen.⁸ After this consumption, Laura heals and she and Lizzie stay living together until they are ready to partake in heterosexual society by marrying and having children, her vampirism having been cured. Even after marrying, heterosexuality is healthy and desirable within the context of matrimony, production of children, and maintenance of family networks. Laura and Lizzie are still able to maintain their relationship after marriage and children; as their performative heteronormativity being fulfilled, their aberrant sexuality is overlooked. The goblin men separate Lizzie and Laura; marriage and children would presumably knit them closer together in some ways as they share experiences of motherhood and their children develop bonds of their own.

This may speak to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality and feeling the need to pretend one is heterosexual by not acknowledging their private homosexual activities. In the seventeenth century, before the Victorian era, homosexuality was virtually commonplace, but discussion surrounding it was not. Historiographer and philosopher Michel Foucault argues that in the prior era, "Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant

⁸ Morill, "Twilight is not Good for Maidens," 5.

familiarity with the illicit.”⁹ However, the Victorians began to regulate sexuality by labelling it in medical as well as religious contexts and forbidding anything other than the reproductive heterosexual relationship. Homosexuals had previously not been labelled, instead just participating in acts of sodomy. The homosexual label became its own identity, transforming the aberrant sexuality into a deviant person, “less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.”¹⁰ Laura and Lizzie never label their relationship and are comfortable with that as it does not consume their identities. They are later able to participate in heterosexual society with no one being the wiser. Yet the same cannot be said of those in *Carmilla*.

Carmilla, written nearly 15 years after “Goblin Market,” demonstrates a shift in attitudes about homosexuality that took place in the mid-nineteenth century. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* begins with another character named Laura, this time the daughter of a widowed nobleman. Laura’s life changes when Carmilla is introduced by way of a carriage accident; her father agrees to let Carmilla stay with them. Laura is conscious of “a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (Le Fanu 29) for Carmilla. She both admires and reviles Carmilla, although she is not sure why she feels the latter. This is later made clear upon the reveal of Carmilla’s vampirism, but Laura becomes uncomfortable even before then because of Carmilla’s intensely intimate actions, saying, “It was like the ardour of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful yet overpowering” (Le Fanu 30). Laura finds this kind of love between two women to be unnatural. Carmilla is a monster because she is queer; her vampirism corresponds with increasing regulation of sexuality occurring within the Victorian age. Laura recognizes the taboo of homosexuality without

⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vintage Books, 1988, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

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giving it a name, although she still finds herself with a homo-sexual attraction. Carmilla goes on to say, “You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one forever” (Le Fanu 30). She constantly kisses and hugs Laura, holding her hands or leaning against her. When Laura asks her if she’s ever been in love, presumably with a man, Carmilla only replies with, “I have been in love with no one, and never shall unless it is with you” (Le Fanu 40). She is never ashamed of her homoerotic desire, which only adds to her monstrousness, especially in the Victorian era. It is the absence of shame about sexuality – not only homoerotic attraction, but female sexual desire in general – that makes Carmilla monstrous. Victorian women were always expected to be somewhat embarrassed by sexual desire, if not to condemn it outright, even within the sanctioned arena of heterosexual marriage. Being utterly unashamed of her desire for another woman, and for having desire in the first place is what makes Carmilla a monster rather than only her literal vampirism. Even a fallen woman in the Victorian era, even a so-called “invert,” was expected to be self-conscious about her non-normative behavior, as Amy Leal argues, “Carmilla’s passion for Laura not only threatens her life, but also the power structure of Victorian society.”¹¹

Laura’s initial impulse to Carmilla’s behavior is to ask if they were related, trying to justify the familiarity with which Carmilla treats her. Carmilla later reveals they are related through Laura’s mother’s family, the Karnsteins, of which there are supposedly none left to bear the name, after Laura finds a picture bearing Carmilla’s likeness under the name of Laura’s ancestor, Mircalla. In a twist of sorts, Carmilla is then discovered to have been Mircalla the whole time, an immortal vampire. Laura is Mircalla’s descendant, with whom she has attempted to engage in an incestuous homosexual relationship, and “By having Carmilla seduce only her own maternal Karnstein descendants, Le Fanu makes vampirism, incest, and

¹¹ Leal, “Unnameable Desires in Le Fanu’s Carmilla,” 38.

homosexuality resonate metaphorically as well as onomastically in his text: each involve a lusting for one's own kind."¹² Carmilla attempts to turn two of her descendants, Laura and Bertha. Neither attempt succeeds. She forms a relationship with Laura, gaining her admiration, before she transforms and bites Laura in the breast and the neck, two body parts heavily associated with sex. The bites are sensual in nature, "as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself" (Le Fanu 51-52). Carmilla's wish to have a beloved companion in her undead state is expressed most in her remark to Laura: "But to die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together" (Le Fanu 37). In the end of the story, when Carmilla is stabbed in the heart with a stake, the violent reassertion of patriarchal order is set in place with her death. The stake is phallic shaped and confirms heterosexuality as the dominant and morally correct sexuality. However, even after Carmilla's demise, Laura is unable to forget her, saying, "and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations--sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room" (Le Fanu 69), illustrating the lingering and haunting effect Carmilla had on her psyche and sexuality.

"Goblin Market" and *Carmilla* are known for their homoerotic and incestuous undertones, and both the literal and figurative vampirism used only develop these further; this shift from metaphorical to literal coincides with changes to the labeling and control of homosexuality in Victorian society, as described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. Both of these works show the move of homosexuality towards being

¹² Ibid., 38-39.

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regarded as a societal taboo as Victorian culture placed guidelines on acceptable sexualities, and there is the restoration of traditional order. However, "Goblin Market" accomplishes this through nurturing in Lizzie's nourishing Laura back to health, and *Carmilla* through violence in Carmilla's death. The vampirism served as a symbol of the abnormal and unacceptable; anyone who partook in sodomy was subsequently branded with the connotation of the monstrous and unnatural. It is interesting to note that Rossetti, a female author, takes a gentler and more maternal approach in a text centered exclusively around women, while Le Fanu takes a more "bloody" approach to return traditional heterosexuality in a text not exclusively focused on females but also men. This shift mirrors the one between the two time periods. These literary works not only document, but may have also contributed to these changes in attitude.

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