



Magdalena Michałczyk-Janasz: Revolutionised Female Vampires: From Femme Fatale to a Mother

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Abstract: Revolutionised Female Vampires: From Femme Fatale to a Mother

Vampires have been en vogue for many centuries. My paper will look at their feminine side, taking into consideration characters that have either been forgotten, overlooked or have become unjustly famous. The figure of a female vampire has changed dramatically over the last century. Female vampires used to be depicted as monsters, nowadays they are civilised, live in the neighbourhood, and are happy to be “ordinary” mothers. In my paper, I would like to focus on three female characters: Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla, Bram Stoker’s Mina and Stephenie Meyer’s Bella, the protagonist of *Twilight*. They represent different models of a female vampire: a villainess, a damsel in distress, and a contemporary vampire, respectively. All three females seem to be liberated and free, yet there are still some elements that are constricting them, such as religion, patriarchal society, their gender, and the cultural context of the period they lived in. The paper also raises the question whether, and to what extent, we have domesticated the vampire. Should we call it “him” or “her”? Can a vampire be a mother or a lost, fragile girl?

Keywords:

Female Vampires, Nineteenth Century Literature, Gothic Fiction, Feminism, Comparative Literature

Abstrakt:

Wampiry są w modzie od wielu wieków. Mój artykuł skupi się na kobiecej stronie tych istot, biorąc pod uwagę postaci zapomniane, pominięte, jak również te, które są niezasłużenie sławne. Postać wampirzycy zmieniła się radykalnie na przestrzeni ostatniego wieku. Kobiety – wampiry zwykły być przedstawiane jako potwory, natomiast obecnie są one ucywilizowane, żyją po sąsiedzku i czują się dobrze w roli matki. W poniższym artykule skupiam się na trzech kobiecych postaciach, tj. Carmilli Josepha Sheridana Le Fanu, Minie Brama Stokera oraz Belli, bohaterce powieści *Zmierzch* autorstwa Stephenie Meyer. Reprezentują one różne modele wampirzycy, tj. odpowiednio czarnego charakteru, damy w opałach i współczesnego wampira. Wszystkie trzy kobiety wydają się być wyzwolone i niezależne, wciąż jednak skrępowane pewnymi elementami takimi jak religia, patriarchalne społeczeństwo, płeć oraz kontekst kulturowy okresu w którym żyły. Artykuł próbuje również odpowiedzieć na pytanie czy i do jakiego stopnia udomowiliśmy wampira. Czy powinniśmy nazywać „to” mianem „on” lub „ona”? Czy wampir potrafi być matką lub zagubioną, delikatną dziewczyną?

Słowa kluczowe:

wampirzyce, literatura dziewiętnastego wieku, powieść gotycka, feminizm, komparatystyka w literaturze

“You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and hating me through death and after.”

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla

Introduction

A cursed person, who will never see the sun again, has been en vogue for many centuries. Vampires have been present in folklore, literature, film and other media. Nevertheless, it seems that most authors and readers have taken interest only in male vampires. Dracula appears to be *the* vampire for most people, as if there was not anything (or anyone) before him or after him.

The introductory quotation to this article was uttered by one of the earliest female vampires in literature, namely Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871) and this article will look at precisely this – the feminine side of the vampire, taking into consideration characters that have been either forgotten, overlooked or have become extremely controversial. The aim of this essay is to show the development of three characters: the previously mentioned *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker’s *Mina*, and a contemporary vampire, Stephenie Meyer’s *Bella Swan*. They were all vampires or part – vampires, part – humans, therefore they perfectly showcase the change of a female vampire throughout centuries; from villainess or *femme fatale* to a mother figure, a being who can be called a *person*, one who is able to love and be loved in return.

If the figure of Count Dracula comes to mind immediately, one may think erroneously that vampire fiction concentrates strongly only on one gender. Obviously, it is partly true, as there have been and there still are many male vampires in fiction. However, the history of a female vampire is, surprisingly, almost as rich as that of her male counterpart. It is rather extraordinary that nowadays a great many people, and especially those who are not familiar with the history of English literature, are able to recall only the figure of the Count or, occasionally, male characters from Anne Rice’s novels. It might be connected with the fact that most of the stories were written by men. One can be under the impression that female heroines, even if they are sometimes the main character of the plot or the story is titled after them, are less significant, being only a complement to the male protagonists.

Before focusing on the three characters, one should mention other important female “she – devils” in literature. They could be interpreted either as vampires, ghostly apparitions or other supernatural beings, depending on the reader’s sensibility. In light of this, however unlike they may be, there is still similarity between them that cannot be overlooked.

In the eighteenth century, in English literature the first female demon appeared to be a prosperous, yet barefoot lady, clad all in white. Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave her a very melodic and sensuous name – *Geraldine*. In his poem “*Christabel*” there was no word

“vampire” though it was rather obvious that she was some kind of a devilish being. There were many aspects indicating her vampirism. First of all, the poem is set against the backdrop of the night, with immediate vampiric connotations springing to mind. Geraldine has problems while crossing the threshold of the castle since according to the popular folklore belief, no evil is able to enter one’s house without being invited¹. Furthermore, she does not want to pray and the owner’s dog growls when she senses her. Finally, Geraldine feels weak when she looks at figures of saints. Therefore, she is unmistakably a “creature of the night”, probably a vampire.

Different types of supernatural beings flourished in the nineteenth century, in the Romantic period. Gothic fiction and dark romanticism, which were abundant in stories about ghosts and demons, were blooming in this epoch. E. A. Poe, the master of macabre and horror, played a pivotal role in popularising the character of a young, beautiful woman, who is ailing and morose. Thus, another model of a female demon, one not directly called a vampire, was embodied by the eponymous hero of Poe’s poem “Ligeia”. The plot of the story is very swift; the beautiful Ligeia falls ill and, although she (...)”wrestled with the Shadow...”² she eventually passes away. However, from beyond her grave she is able to drain the life force from Lady Rowena, the narrator’s second wife. Such behaviour of consuming somebody, even if it is not their blood, strongly resembles a vampiric figure, a so – called energy vampire. Eventually, when the lady dies, she somehow transforms into Ligeia. It might therefore be supposed that Ligeia metaphorically ate her alive.

Another example of a female vampire is Madeleine from “The Fall of the House of Usher”. This short story is yet another of Poe’s narratives touching upon the same subjects, that is malady and death. Madeleine comes down with a strange disease and is buried in the family tomb, supposedly alive³, as there is “[...] mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspicious lingering smile upon the lip [...]”⁴. She possesses inhuman strength, as one night she breaks down the vault’s heavy doors and kills Roderick, her twin brother.

The last example would be an unnamed *femme fatale* from Keats’s poem “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, who uses her charm to entrap her male victims. She leaves her prisoners, or even slaves, both male and female, “pale, death – pale”, and “starved”⁵. This dangerous woman might have been a fairy as well, however, she also resembled a vampire, having captives and leaving them in utter horror.

¹ Leonard R.N. Ashley, professor emeritus of English at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, wrote in his book entitled *The Complete Book of Vampires*: “It is a well-established truth, in vampire myth, that the predator cannot hurt a victim without being invited. Superstition holds that a vampire cannot enter a house without permission.” Leonard R.N. Ashley, *The Complete Books of Vampires*, Barricade Books, Fort Lee 1998, subchapter: *Willing Victims*, paragraph 1.

² Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales*, Penguin Popular Classics, Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, London 1994, p.53.

³ Premature burial, among other themes such as death of a young, beautiful woman or madness, was typical in Edgar Allan Poe’s writings. The author used this idea in “Berenice” and “The Cask of Amontillado”. He also published a short story entitled “The Premature Burial” in 1844.

⁴ E. Poe, *op. cit.*, p.89.

⁵ John Keats, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci in Lyric Poems*. Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola 1991, stanzas X – XI.



To return to the main protagonists of this article, being or becoming a vampire through a transition process had a great influence on the life of the three characters; it either improved or destroyed it. Carmilla was only a girl found by accident on a road, when Laura asked her father to take care of the exotic guest; however, both she and Laura, who was the host's daughter, were treated equally. In *Dracula*, Mina Harker, while "infected", started to be almost a leader of the Crew of Light, which was the name of a group of men who wanted to destroy the main villain, that is the malicious Count Dracula. Bella, on the other hand, had problems with family, friends, school and pregnancy after her transformation.

Carmilla – a predator and *femme fatale*

From the three characters, Carmilla is chronologically first. She was a vampire created by the Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Nowadays, the figure of Carmilla is not known to the wider public, therefore she is also advertised as being the original vampire, as evidenced in an ebook *Carmilla (Gothic Classics)* from 2017 which is subtitled "Featuring First Female Vampire – Mysterious and Compelling Tale that Influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula*"⁶; indeed Carmilla might have been a possible inspiration to Stoker, as Le Fanu published his story in 1872, well before Stoker published his famous novel in 1897. Therefore, the female vampire predated her probable male version by twenty five years. There are also other aspects of Stoker's "borrowings"; John G. Melton, a religious scholar connected with the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, wrote in his book entitled *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopaedia of the Undead* that:

Carmilla would directly influence Stoker's presentation of the vampire, especially his treatment of the female vampires (...). The influence of *Carmilla* was even more visible in "Dracula's Guest", the deleted chapter of *Dracula* later published as a short story (105).⁷

The plot of the story revolves around Laura, the main character and the narrator. Her father is deceived by a beautiful, mysterious woman whose name is Carmilla. The two young women meet when a carriage with Carmilla and her mother nearly breaks down with Laura being the witness; the latter is outside of her castle or "Schloss" as she would call it in her seemingly native tongue. However, it is not the first time they see each other. At the beginning of the book, Laura recalls a dream, or a nightmare, as "[it] produced terrible impression upon (her) mind"⁸. She gives a rather bleak and horrifying description:

I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. [...] She caressed me with her

⁶ Sheridan Le Fanu, Ebook, *Carmilla. (Gothic Classic) Featuring First Female Vampire – Mysterious and Compelling Tale that Influenced Bram Stoker's Dracula*, E – artnow, Worldwide, 2017.

⁷ However, Elizabeth Russell Miller, Professor Emerita at Memorial University of Newfoundland, who is specialising in *Dracula*, does not agree with Melton. In her *A Dracula Handbook* she writes that such idea is a common misconception, stated by Stoker's widow in a preface to "Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Tales". For Miller, this is "highly unlikely", as the short story and the novel are completely different in form. Nevertheless, according to Miller, it might have been a draft or only a short-story intended to be published apart from *Dracula*. Elizabeth Russell Miller, *A Dracula Handbook*, Xlibris Corporation, Bloomington 2005, p.73.

⁸ Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, Hesperus Press Limited, London 2013, p.9.



hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling...I was awakened by a sensation of two needles ran into my breast very deep [...] and I cried loudly⁹.

When Laura sees Carmilla after the accident, she is shocked, as she identifies the stranger's face with that from the terrifying nightmare. The recognition is mutual as Laura appears familiar to Carmilla as well. Almost immediately there begins a very close friendship, as Laura is longing for some companionship and feels extremely lonely in her Schloss in Styria.

Unfortunately for the innocent girl, Carmilla very soon starts to behave alarmingly. She seems to be a typical predator – above all she wants to eat and destroy. Gradually, she makes Laura sleepless and starved, which results in her seemingly fading away. The vampire poses a threat to Laura's innocence, because she is able to please her in a way that is forbidden, as "[...] she would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure...breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell...she drew me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses[...]"¹⁰. Laura cannot decide whether she is appalled or thrilled. Lesbian motifs are very much emphasised in the narrative, showing a toxic and painful relationship between the two women. Homosexual relationships are shown in a bad light, as a sinister and morally unacceptable behaviour, which leads to far – reaching, mortal consequences.

Such behaviour is a perfect example of a *femme fatale's* doings. Carmilla is a magical, beautiful creature. She does not want to conceal anything about herself.

Carmilla, despite being the eponymous character of the book, was deprived of any depth, being only a monster with almost no feelings, a seducer who desired not love or sex, but blood. All her pledges, such as for instance the very famous line "You are mine, you shall be mine, and you and I are one for ever"¹¹, were unconvincing. She was not made to love, and it was clear she did not care for Laura. Moreover, the young girl was not enough for her, as she was killing other girls around Laura's household, as if she were a hungry animal. The only thing that interested Carmilla was to satiate her hunger.

It is important to stress that the book was written by a man, and Carmilla was eventually killed not by her victim, Laura, but by a group of men. Therefore, Le Fanu's writing could be treated as an antifeminist book, where men are rescuers and wise people, while women are either delicate girls, voracious villainesses or they are altogether absent, as Laura's mother in this particular story.

Mina Harker – a damsel in distress?

In contrast to Carmilla, Wilhelmina Harker, or simply Mina, as she is known, is almost a perfect example of a typical, nineteenth – century damsel in distress. Readers might think that her role as a female protagonist of *Dracula* is unimportant, as at the beginning she is only a young solicitor, Jonathan Harker's fiancée, while he makes a business trip to Transylvania in order to help Count Dracula purchase a plot of land in England. As a woman of the nineteenth century, she could not do much, however, she enjoyed modern activities, such as typing and learning

⁹ Sheridan Le Fanu, *op.cit.*, pp.9 – 11.

¹⁰ Sheridan Le Fanu, *op.cit.*, p.33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

how to operate machines. She was a respected lady, nearly an ideal of a Victorian woman. She was obedient and sexless, which makes her very different from the previous character that was sensuous and voracious.

On the one hand, Mina was praised by all; both male and female characters in the book expressed a certain degree of reverence towards her and her skills. Her intelligence proved to be priceless in the fight against the Count, however, Van Helsing – while he was complimenting her – diminished her role and emphasized that, although she was an extraordinary woman, she was still only a female: “Ah, that wonderful Madam Mina! She has man’s brain, a brain that a man should have were he much gifted...”¹²

What is more, all Mina’s actions were intended to help men and the Crew of Light – she was caring for them almost like a mother, organising all her writings for them and without her help they would have been lost. Nevertheless, they still told her many times that she should not be bothered with such matters. She was a leader, but at the same time she was extremely submissive and humble.¹³

On the other hand, she was also a representative of the “New Woman”, having interests in modern things and manners and being employed as an assistant schoolmistress. She earned a living by herself and was well – educated¹⁴. Nevertheless, she was somewhat reluctant to admit it, as in her journal she did not use this epithet very often. She also could have been to some extent afraid of such women - in chapter eight, Mina was describing a little picnic that she had with Lucy. She stated that that they “[...] would have shocked the “New Woman” with (their) appetites! **Men are more tolerant, bless them!**”¹⁵ However, one could notice that Harker was also approving of the idea - while considering Lucy’s and Holmwood’s relationship, she predicted that in the future “New Women” will be the ones to propose marriage. She commented: “And a nice job [they] will make of it, too!”¹⁶

However, being a New Woman in the Victorian times was dangerously close to being a *femme fatale*. The process of becoming a vampire also made her a *femme fatale*, however, as a vampire she gained much more control. Therefore, Mina shared at least one trait with Carmilla, as she could be also called *femme fatale*. On the other hand, the term *femme fragile* would suit her as well, because she was delicate and vulnerable.

Mina seems to be the most complicated character in the book. She had a quasi – lesbian relationship with Lucy, a sexless relationship with her fiancé and an abnormal one with the Count. She had power when she was turning into a demon, however, after the Count’s death she became a typical Victorian wife and mother.

¹² Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Harper Press, London 2011, p.373.

¹³ Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio, *Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker’s “Dracula”*, “Victorian Literature and Culture”, vol.33, September 2005, p.488.

¹⁴ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 1997, p.105.

¹⁵ B. Stoker, *Dracula*, *op.cit.*, p.107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.107.



In *Dracula*, as in Le Fanu's short story, men are depicted as both stronger and wiser. The character of Mina is one of the most thoroughly described in the book. Her figure is much more developed than that of Jonathan's, although it is his narration that opens the book. Readers, however, were able to learn about Mina's interests and feelings, not her husband's, and her daily routine was described in detail. Nevertheless, Mina's aim was still only to complement men.

Bella – a mother figure.

The third protagonist, a contemporary vampire, is different from the previous ones. Unlike Carmilla, she cannot be called a predator or seductress, not even after she becomes a vampire. While Carmilla lives to feed upon her victims, the only thing that Bella wants is to be accepted and to be a good wife. When she becomes pregnant, she does not decide to terminate the pregnancy, although the unborn child causes her much pain. Therefore, she desires to be a mother. She is not similar to Mina either, as she is not involved in education or feminism.

Bella is closer to modern readers, as they are able to identify with her. She is an ordinary teenager with stereotypical "teenage" problems - she has troubles with her divorced parents, is forced to move between cities and above all longs for love and acceptance. Therefore, Bella represents a new model of a female vampire. In addition, Bella and the main vampiric family, the Cullens, serve as an example of vampires who are domesticated and, indeed, they are definitely more civilised. They do not want to lead their lives in isolation, on the contrary, the family lives in the neighbourhood and goes to schools, universities and work. The vampire is not a monster any more, unlike his more bloodthirsty counterpart of the nineteenth century¹⁷. Carmilla could have been called *it* – a creature, more a vampire than a girl. Bella, on the other hand, could not be named anything other than a *schoolgirl*. The character of Bella, although she is the main protagonist, is much less complicated than that of the savage, lesbian Carmilla or the intelligent, brave Mina.

To sum up, all three females seem to be liberated and free, yet there are still some elements that are constricting them, such as religion, patriarchal society, gender, and the cultural context of the period they lived in. Set against a Victorian background of the dominance of men in almost every aspect of life, their femininity cast a shadow over two of the three heroines. Both Carmilla and Mina were viewed as the weaker sex and any foray into the world of men, be it through the former's lustful and dominative nature or the latter's proactive attitude resulted in them being punished – either for being a vampire or being a woman. Carmilla, as a seducer and *femme fatale* destroyed the life of an innocent girl. As punishment for their lesbian relationship, Laura could not have children. Therefore, it would have been logical if Laura wanted to take revenge, however, in the end Carmilla was killed by men, because Laura was too helpless. Mina was supposed not to interfere with the plans of the Crew of Light; as a typical Victorian woman she was expected to stay at home, be gentle and calm. Bella stands out from the three as she is not a product of the Victorian era. This

¹⁷ Terry Spaise, *Necrophilia and SM: The Deviant Side of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"*, *Journal of Popular Culture*. 38.4 (2005): 744 – 762 [in:] Pramod Naymar, *How to Domesticate a Vampire: Gender, Blood Relations and Sexuality in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight"*. Nebula, Vol. 7 Issue 3, 2010, p.61.



being said, the author of *Twilight*, is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter – day Saints, and her character, might be a reflection of her beliefs.

The three women demonstrate the changes that female vampires have undergone. From Carmilla, a typical seductress and a demon, whose emotions and thoughts are not disclosed to the readers, through a mixture of a “she – devil” and an obedient Victorian woman in the figure of Mina Harker, who is torn between being a good fiancée and future wife and her need to express herself, to a contemporary vampire, an ordinary girl, Bella Swan. To some extent, a revolution in the vampire world has happened.

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