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Media Erotics & Adaptation:
A Comparative Textual Analysis of *Carmilla*

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Abstract

This project is concerned with understanding the different ways in which *Carmilla* (1872), a gothic novella, and its 2014 web series adaptation differently approach the same basic narrative, especially with regards to their respective representations of individuals who identify as sexual and gender minorities. One of the major functions of importance in this study was to understand the temporality and cultural conditions, which lead to the perceived need for a postmodern adaptation of a pre-modernist text. Through textual analysis, the author compared J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) to Jordan Hall's adaptation (2014). In this analysis, significant differences existed between the original text and the adaptation of *Carmilla*. This paper argues that with an understanding of media erotics and queer narrative theory, critical audiences can better identify the arguments media creators make about the nature of queerness and marginalized identity within the media products they consume. Implications for further research include the recognition of *Carmilla* (2014) as an example for the ways in which media representations of queerness are changing, as well as a call for further research on the current state of queer representations in more mainstream media outlets.

Keywords: queer representations, comparative textual analysis, media erotics, media criticism

Media Erotics & Adaptation: A Comparative Textual Analysis of *Carmilla*

Originally published in 1872, *Carmilla* is a novella written by Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. The novella, which has since been published in standalone and critical editions, was originally a part of an anthology of Le Fanu's work titled *In a Glass Darkly* (Le Fanu, 2013, xviii). The work is most notably referenced in present-day literary discussions as a lesbian precursor to Bram Stoker's more famous vampire story: *Dracula*. Despite not gaining as much cultural recognition as Stoker's work, *Carmilla* has still invited several adaptations, which use the homoeroticism of the plot to sensationalize audiences, including Carl Theodore Dreyer's 1932 film, *Vampyr* and Roy Ward Baker's 1970s pornographic short film, *The Vampire Lovers* (Weber, 2016). A more recent adaptation, which I analyze in dialogue with Le Fanu's novella, is Jordan Hall's web series. This series was uploaded in weekly installments starting in August of 2014. I conducted a comparative textual analysis of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hall's adaptation and argue that queer and feminine identities in the present day exist within structures of oppression like those in Le Fanu's patriarchy.

Le Fanu's novella is an epistolary novel, which documents the experiences of a Styrian young woman named Laura with a charming and beautiful vampire named Carmilla. Carmilla is abandoned at Laura's isolated home very near the same time that Laura's would-be friend, Bertha Rheinfeldt dies under mysterious circumstances. The story follows Laura as she falls under Carmilla's seductive lure and comes to feel attraction for her new companion, despite her sudden health concerns. It is revealed to Laura's father that Carmilla is a vampire, and he and other men from Laura's small village trap and destroy Carmilla to save Laura. The novella ends with the gruesome beheading and burning of Carmilla's corpse.

Hall's adaption sets the story in the dorm room of Laura Hollis, a freshman student at Silas University, located somewhere in Canada. When Laura's roommate and new friend Betty Spielsdorf goes missing after a night of partying, Laura is confused and enraged by the lack of care on the University's part. She is soon introduced to her replacement roommate, an angst-riddled, cynical junior-level student: Carmilla. Through an investigation into the missing students at Silas, Laura and her friends Perry, Lafontaine and Danny uncover the university's administration to truly be a clan of bureaucratic vampires, which Carmilla begrudgingly participates in, despite their mistreatment of her. Laura and company eventually convinces Carmilla to help them take down the Dean and her clan, rescue the missing students and destroy the Dean herself. Of course, Laura and Carmilla spend most of the series bantering and flirting with one another, and the series ends with Carmilla's recovery and the beginning an official romantic relationship with Laura.

The two narratives differ interestingly, and create questions about the meanings that audiences can take from each. This study attempts to 1) identify how the narratives differ from one another, and 2) to understand what these readings say about the cultural climates surrounding the writing of each.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study exists within the critical paradigm of communication research, using a queer feminist epistemology. The specific theories I address are Ott's (2004) theory of Media Erotic and Walter Fischer's Narrative Paradigm (Griffin, 2012). Media erotics theory posits that audience response to media is not just classifiable in terms of whether it is accepted or rejected, but can be understood in terms of why the audience responds in the way that it does (Ott & Mack, 2010). An audience, Ott (2004) explains, may derive pleasure from media in one of two

ways: either through *plaisir*—a comforting reinforcement of cultural norms and values—or *jouissance*, which excites audiences by subverting and transgressing cultural norms and values.

Narrative paradigm relates to the importance of the narrator and derives meaning from their narrative choices (Griffin, 2012). For this study, it was important to employ narrative paradigm through a queer lens, understanding that differences exist between queer narratives told by and for straight individuals and those, which are told from a queer perspective. Although narrative theory has been historically considered incompatible with queer theory because of the different valuing of individualistic and collectivistic understandings of self, recent research in queer narrative inquiry has resulted in a more harmonious understanding of the two (Phelan, 2015).

Adaptation theory is also used to understand the ways in which Le Fanu and Hall's respective presentations of the *Carmilla* narrative can be understood in relation to one another. Although it is still a developing theory, Boozer (2008) and Edwards (2007) emphasize that the key aspect of adaptation theory is that it treats adaptation and original work as standalone, equal texts. Instead of privileging the original text as a more pure form of the narrative, Boozer (2008) encourages audiences to understand the creative differences, which emerge as natural developments reflective of their own cultural climates, as well as the perspective of the creators.

Finally, before beginning the comparative textual analysis, I develop an understanding of the treatment of queer feminist epistemology within the genre of vampire fiction. The vampire genre is necessarily concerned with sexuality, as the vampire is a vehicle for exploring sexual desire and dubiously consensual sexual encounters (Powell, 2003). For this reason, it is important to consider the ways in which power exists in relation to the vampires a symbolic rapist. To the point of sexuality, it is also important to note that heteronormativity and

homoeroticism within the vampire genre have contributed to bisexual erasure, which this study seeks to avoid (Richter, 2013). With all of these considerations, an epistemology develops which promotes the celebration of transgression, queering and the empowerment of queer and feminine voices to speak for and about themselves.

Research Questions

1. How does *Carmilla* (2014) reframe a story, which predates contemporary notions of feminism and queer theory?
2. In what ways do thematic differences between adaptation and original text create narrative dissonance?
3. How can one distinguish between *jouissance* and *plaisir* in critical understanding of *Carmilla* (1872) and *Carmilla* (2014)?

Methodology

This study employs a comparative textual analysis method. Both texts were closely examined in their entirety, and emergent themes were identified (eg: the perception of threat, appearance of patriarchy). The main emergent themes were: the uncanny, queer relationships, queer identity, narrative voice, rape/rape culture, and systems of oppression. The texts were then revisited and coded for the emergent themes. The coding process considered both textual and meta-textual components for Le Fanu's work, and textual, meta-textual, visual and auditory components for Hall's work. The texts were then considered both as standalone narratives and in relation to one another.

This comparative study did not consider any of the adaptations of *Carmilla*, which preceded Hall's 2014 adaptation, in order to simplify the relationship between the adaptation and original text without introducing adaptation-to-adaptation comparisons. It also did not consider

the second or third season of Hall's *Carmilla*, because the narrative is less adaptive of and more inspired by Le Fanu's novella. Hall's *Carmilla* is an on-going series, which future studies are encouraged to consider.

Major Findings

This study had findings in five major subject areas: the uncanny, reclamation of the queer narrative voice, representation of queer identities, systems of oppression for queerness and femininity and the vampire in relation to rape and rape culture. This section will discuss these major findings of this study, and provide textual support and comparison which lead me to conclude that these findings emerge from comparative textual analysis of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hall's adaptation.

***Carmilla* and the Uncanny**

The concept of the vampire is inherently uncanny, in the Freudian sense. The vampire is a contradiction and conflation of the known and unknown: both living and dead, transgressing humanity while embodying it. In this way, the vampire can be seen as a queer figure because vampires are not expected to live within binaries or socially imposed norms. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* in particular is an example of the transgressive power of the vampire, because Carmilla herself is a sympathetic exception to the malicious reputation of the vampire. Williamson (2005) suggests that the lesbian vampire in particular is a sympathetic subset of the vampire. She reminds readers that a critical reading of the traditional lesbian vampire story lends itself to an understanding of the ways in which stories like *Carmilla* simultaneously villanize queerness, queer female friendships and eroticize femininity for the excitement of male audiences (Williamson, 2005). However, despite the ways in which *Carmilla* could be read as a condemnation of queerness, Carmilla herself is made sympathetic by her seemingly genuine mutual romantic and affectionate

interest in Laura (Williamson, 2005). Carmilla is both a threat to Laura's sexual purity and physical safety, as well as a tragic figure in her own right who is naturally inclined to destroy the object of her affection.

Literary theorist Ken Gelder proposes that the ways in which Le Fanu's Carmilla influences Laura on both the conscious and subconscious levels demonstrates a blurring of the vampire and victim, making her an uncanny figure (1994). Gelder also identifies Carmilla and Laura's relationship as an example of the uncanny. In his reading of *Carmilla* (1872), Le Fanu is leading the reader to believe that Laura's attraction to Carmilla is vain, if not autosexual, insofar as it is Carmilla's femininity which Laura is attracted to, not her more masculine qualities (Gelder 1994). Laura is looking for her own attractive qualities in Carmilla, finds them, and is attracted to herself as reflected in the image she sees of Carmilla.

In comparing the uncanny between Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hall's adaptation, I found that while the vampire remains an inherently uncanny figure, queerness is not the source of uncanniness in the adaptation. There are elements about Laura's world at Silas University which are uncanny, certainly, but it is not her attraction to women that is uncanny. This is best shown through a discussion of Laura and Carmilla's differing relational developments between the two works.

In the original text, Laura is immediately drawn to Carmilla—Laura's deep desire for companionship is fulfilled by Carmilla's fragile, languid and immobilized feminine presence (Le Fanu 1872). Before even getting a close look at Carmilla, Laura is excited to meet her. It is a narcissistic desire for self which motivates Laura's attraction to Carmilla, blurring the lines between self and other and begging the question of who is the actual object of Laura's desire: Carmilla or herself?

In the 2014 adaptation, by comparison, Laura is not initially attracted to Carmilla. Instead, Laura resents Carmilla for attempting to replace Betty as her roommate. Fueled by this resentment Laura resists the blurring between Betty and Carmilla, as well as Carmilla and herself. Additionally the relationship between Carmilla and Laura is categorized by difference, not similarity, in this adaptation. In Laura's first remarks about Carmilla, she labels Carmilla as "the worst roommate ever," citing their differences of opinion as a major source of relational incompatibility between the two (Hall, 2014, Episode 4). As Laura comes to feel attraction for Carmilla, there is clearly nothing narcissistic about her attraction, as the traits that make Carmilla dangerous and transgressive also make her strikingly different than Laura's naïveté.

In exploring incarnations of the uncanny in both Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hall's adaptation, this study found that Hall's *Carmilla* lends itself to a more a reading, which heralds transgression, rather than villainizes it.

Reclamation of the Queer Voice

The first major finding of this study was that Hall's *Carmilla* provides a reclamation of the queer narrative voice, which was silenced in the original novella. While Le Fanu's *Carmilla* provides an arguably queer narrative, the cultural perspective of Laura's narrated voice is undoubtedly heteronormative. Even as Laura is accepting that Carmilla has romantic feelings for her, she tells the reader that she wondered, "What if a boyish lover had found his way into the hours and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade..." (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 30). Her subconscious need to justify Carmilla's affections towards her as masculine in nature tells the reader that Laura's world is clearly heteronormative, as she is shown to have the deeply held cultural belief that masculinity and femininity are naturally attracted to one another. Although Le Fanu's Laura comes to embrace her attraction to Carmilla, the novella becomes something of a

cautionary tale, about the dangers of normalizing homosexual attraction. Hall's *Carmilla*, in contrast, normalizes, empowers and celebrates queerness—not limiting this exploration to just homosexuality.

As previously mentioned, the most prevalent cultural values expressed in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* are heteronormativity and patriarchy, which are reinforced throughout the text. The patriarchal imposition of gender expression and sexuality can be seen even through Le Fanu's use of the epistolary and layered narration. An epistolary novel or novella, that is a literary work which tells its story in the first person through the exchange of letters, largely accomplishes this feat through one of two major storytelling vehicles: dialogically or through layered narration. A dialogic epistolary considers more than one voice engaging in dialogue with one another, usually in a call and response format. *Carmilla*, however, is told in one long letter, conveying plot through layered narration. The effect is the surrounding of a single queer, feminine voice with multiple heteronormative, masculine voices, effectively marginalizing Laura, despite her position as the main character and narrator.

Le Fanu's *Carmilla* opens with a prologue that is written from the perspective of the unnamed editor of the posthumous Doctor Hesselius's papers. The narrator explains that what the reader is about to read is the letters of a young woman that detail her experiences with the occult in her youth. He goes on to describe Laura as "intelligent" and "clever" before informing the reader that she has died since writing her letters to Dr. Hesselius, but assures the reader that Laura "probably could have added little to the narrative which she communicates..." (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 3). By including this narrator, Le Fanu introduces the reader to two male figures before they are able to read one word in Laura's voice. In doing so, the narrative itself becomes mediated by the voice of patriarchy, in effect lessening the power of Laura's story.

The rest of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is told in Laura's first person limited point of view, until General Spielsdorf appears at the *schloss*. As soon as the General appears, bearing the story of the unfortunate death of his niece, Bertha Rheinfeldt, his dialogue proceeds for chapters with very few interjections in Laura's voice. Laura is effectively silenced by the priority of his narrative, and although she regains control when his story finishes, she is only able to do so retrospectively. The narrator Laura is given the space and time to reflect on her experiences that Laura as a character is unable to in the time narrated.

The effect of the layered narration of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is that Laura's voice is continuously surrounded by the voices of heteronormativity and masculinity, to the point where she is at times drowned out. Her queerness is unacknowledged by those around her and downplayed by her father and General Spielsdorf as a manifestation of the *Carmilla*'s vampiric hold. Despite this patronizing effect, Laura is still the voice of the narrative for most of the story. One of the more interesting things about Laura's perceived control as the narrator is that telling this story is not something that she wants to do. Her purpose for narration is clearly articulated as a response to Dr. Hesselius's correspondence, as she writes, "Nothing but your [Dr. Hesselius's] earnest desire so repeatedly expressed could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for months to come, and reinduced [sic] a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 93). It is not Laura's aim in narrating this story to make her voice heard or her experiences legitimized, but to provide as accurate an account as she is capable of to satisfy the requests of Dr. Hesselius, despite the fact that it clearly has traumatized her. The recollection of her time with *Carmilla* has not been a

therapeutic experience for her, and the reader has no indication that she has gained anything at all for reliving her nightmarish past.

Laura's character in the 2014 adaptation is not subject to the same layered narrative. The story is told in Hall's adaptation through a series of video web logs, more commonly referred to as "vlogs". This storytelling style collapses the layers between Laura and the viewer, completely eliminating the characters of Dr. Hesselius and his unnamed assistant. Furthermore, the web series represents narrative time differently than the novella does. Instead of Laura's reflections and commentary coming from a temporal place years further along than the time narrated, the web series makes the action and narration nearly instantaneous. Due to restrictions of the single-frame camera usage—the only setting the viewer is able to see in the web series is a single angle of Laura and Carmilla's dorm room—action is more often than not explained soon after the fact instead of shown, but the Laura and her friends are still processing and working through the issues and questions the action raises during the narration. Hall's adaptation empowers queer voices to speak for themselves, protect their own interests, and to proudly subvert the heteronormative expectations they have inherited.

Even from the opening episodes of Hall's *Carmilla*, it is clear that Laura is her own advocate. In fact, activism is Laura's main motivation, both as a character and a narrator. Although the project starts as a journalism project, it is made clear that this series is not a found-footage documentary, but an intentionally uploaded and curated series of vlogs. Laura includes in the episode "Why Bother" the decision making process that went into her eventual uploading these videos, directly acknowledging her future viewers, saying, "...Girls go missing and nobody seems to care. So, maybe that's just the way it is, but that does not mean that I have to accept it... We can do this together" (Hall, 2014, Episode 6). This sets the tone for Laura's relationship to

the viewer, characterizing her frequent and direct eye contact with the camera, referencing “we” and “you” to include the viewer in the action of the narrative.

Further, Laura is seen to have complete editorial control over the content, pacing, and framing of her narrative. In an early episode, Laura flashes back to the previous episode, which ended with alarms sounding and lights flashing, and Perry ominously bursting into Laura’s dorm room shouting, “It’s a town hall meeting! They’ve called a town hall!” (Hall, 2014, Episode 6). Laura cuts from this dramatic scene to later that night, relieving the tension of the scene by explaining that the actual events were relatively mundane in comparison to the ominous connotations of the previous episode’s ending. She apologizes to the viewer for the sensationalism, saying “Sorry for getting all cliff-hanger-y. Sometimes a girl’s gotta manufacture her own excitement, you know?” (Hall, 2014, Episode 7). Laura is shown to be the videographer, editor and narrator of her story, giving her complete control of the story, with brief interjections from her friends. Unlike the latter half of the novella where Laura is silent for chapters at a time, Laura is physically present in every episode of the web series. There are no flashbacks or elongated soliloquies about Carmilla’s previous exploits or supposed crimes that are not evaluated and weighed by Laura for the benefit of the viewer. By making sure that the viewer is aware that Laura is in complete control of her own story, Hall ensures that the narrative voice of her adaptation of *Carmilla* is both queer and empowered. This reclaims the homoerotic treatment of Laura and Carmilla’s relationship seen in the novella and creates a space for self-legitimized storytelling which does not rely on a patriarchal endorsement to convince the audience of the queer narrator’s authority.

In addition to the ways in which Laura’s queer voice is reclaimed, Carmilla’s voice is also reclaimed in Hall’s adaptation. Le Fanu’s story includes dialogue in Carmilla’s voice, of

course, but she is never given any sense of authorial control for her own story. The narrative from the beginning villainizes Carmilla, and paints her as psychologically manipulative. She is never given a chance to prove or disprove the sincerity of her affections for Laura, which leaves the reader to wonder if Carmilla's attraction to Laura is genuine or predatory. The Carmilla who appears in Hall's adaptation, however, is given the opportunity to not only legitimize her feelings for Laura, but also to reclaim her history. The episode "Sock Puppets and European History" shows a captive Carmilla telling her "tragic backstory" to Laura, who interprets the events of Carmilla's history as a sock puppet show, in a misguided attempt to keep her vlogs lighthearted (Hall, 2014, Episode 20). This episode is particularly important for understanding the ways in which Hall's adaptation serves as a vehicle for queer narrative reclamation because it retroactively gives agency to Le Fanu's Carmilla. Carmilla in Hall's adaptation is revealed to be the same character from Le Fanu's original text, blurring the line between adaptation and continuation, and essentially queering both narratives. It is revealed in this episode that Carmilla's backstory is very similar to the original text, as it recounts a generalized plot of Le Fanu's novella. However, it revises as much as it retells, changing the name of Le Fanu's Laura to "Ell," so as not to be confused with Hall's Laura, and making the important revision that Carmilla did not die at the hands of the men in Ell's life. Instead, Carmilla becomes a tragic, romantic heroine, who is shown to be capable of sincere romantic love for other women—a privilege her earlier incarnation was not afforded.

Hall's adaptation asks viewers to take the voices of the queer people who narrate the story as expert authorities in their own experiences in a way that Le Fanu's version of *Carmilla* does not. The narrative voice of Laura demands respect and authorial control throughout the story in Hall's adaptation, without the patriarchal insertions that appear in the novella.

Furthermore, by giving Carmilla a voice and the respect of the characters in the web series, Hall is able to invite a more sympathetic view of the character, effectively answering the question which has been such a source of debate in interpreting Le Fanu's *Carmilla*: Does Carmilla truly love Laura romantically? Hall's adaptation clearly and firmly answers *yes* and recognizes both Laura and Carmilla as queer women with romantic and sexual attractions to each other and other women.

Representations of Queer Identities

Independent from their relationships to others, queer characters appear more frequently and more diversely in the 2014 adaptation than in the original text. However, it should be noted that the ambiguity that surrounds the identities of characters in the original text is only marginally less present.

While Le Fanu's *Carmilla* does represent a progressive and transgressive representation of same-sex desire and does defy the cultural and literary norms of its time, the novella's treatment of lesbian desire as a behavior may cause a certain level of narrative dissonance for the present day reader, who may be more familiar with understandings of sexual orientation as an aspect of identity. Laura's sexual attraction and romantic affections for Carmilla are read as passive phenomena, which happen to her as Carmilla's vampiric hold over her strengthens. Despite lesbianism being central to the plot and character interaction of the narrative, it is notable that the word "lesbian" and other contemporary slang which refers to female same-sex desire are completely absent from the text. This may have been an effort on Le Fanu's part to not scandalize his readers, or to reinforce Laura's innocence and confusion regarding her experiences.

Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is really only concerned with the relationship between Laura and Carmilla, and therefore it is difficult to separate either of the two main characters from their relationship enough to fully discuss them as individual queer people. That said, both of Carmilla's referenced victims were female (Le Fanu, 1872). There are two major reasons why this evidence alone is not enough to conclude that Carmilla's identity was classifiably "lesbian" or even "queer". Firstly, as Carmilla's attractions to Bertha and Laura were never motivationally diagnosed in the text, it is impossible for readers to safely say whether Carmilla's affectionate behaviors were sexually or predatorily based. Secondly, if one assumes that the nature of the vampire is both lustful and blood-lustful-- in other words, if a Carmilla's attractions are read as *both* sexually and predatorily motivated-- then there is still not enough evidence to say that the gender Carmilla's victim base necessarily makes her a lesbian, at least. There is no discussion of Carmilla's preferences in a potential sexual or romantic partner, and as such, the reader must remain open to a more ambiguous reading of her character. She does tell Laura, "I have never been in love and never shall... unless it should be with you" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 40). However, there is some question to how reliable Carmilla is as a conversation partner, as she is attempting to seduce Laura in this chapter. She may just be expressing this in an effort to gain Laura's trust.

The same ambiguity of sexual orientation can be extended to a reading of Le Fanu's Laura. Many times throughout the early portions of the text, Laura's narration emphasizes to the reader that her life until meeting Carmilla had been lonely. In reflecting on their first encounter, Laura writes, "Young people like, and even love, on impulse. I was flattered by the evident, as yet undeserved, fondness she showed me" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 25). It appears that much of Laura's attraction to Carmilla is rooted in a mirroring of Carmilla's behaviors toward her. It should also be noted that Laura also initially receives Carmilla's advances with a great deal of

hesitation, as she describes her feelings for Carmilla as "hateful" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 30). Her conflicted feelings may reflect a psychological intrusion on Carmilla's part as the root of her later more reciprocal behaviors. It may also be argued that Laura's sexual attractions are more bisexual in nature. In an aforementioned passage, Laura writes of her suspicions regarding Carmilla's true intentions, saying, "What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with the assistance of a clever adventuress? But there were many things against this hypothesis, highly interesting as it was to my vanity" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 30). Reading Le Fanu's Laura as a lesbian, as she has been historically, does not consider the implications of this passage to speak to a more bisexual understanding of her character. The text allows room for interpretations of Laura's sexuality to be interpreted differently by audiences, despite the fact that a traditional interpretation of the text often does not. Laura's character may be less essentially lesbian and more fluidly queer than has been interpreted by literary scholars in the past.

Hall's adaptation is in some ways similar to Le Fanu's original text in that it does not use the words "lesbian," "LGBT," or "queer" in any form, despite the fact that it would not be unusual for the time or place that it is set, as it could have been for Le Fanu's Styria. This is perhaps also telling for Hall's adaptation because the instance of queer behavior is so much more frequent than in Le Fanu's novella. Nearly every character in the web series is shown to have some aspect of queerness to their identity, making straight characters like Will and Kirsch the minority. The intentional lack of this language can be interpreted as an attempt to keep queerness ambiguous in an effort to promote a more fluid, spectrum approach to sexuality. By not categorizing its characters in to the cleanly defined "lesbian" or "straight," Hall's adaptation is able to queer the binary that exists between heterosexual and homosexual. Additionally, by not

making outing and self-identification a plot point, the story is able to focus on giving the characters the agency to act as queer people, not just define themselves.

In the case of Laura, the lack of label on her sexuality normalizes her queerness. Laura's respective attractions to Danny and Carmilla are not in spite of their feminine identities, as was the case for Le Fanu's Laura. Rather, Hall's Laura seems to have already come to terms with her sexual and romantic attraction to women before the start of the series, as it is never addressed as a point of internal conflict for her. For example, the audience sees Laura happily dancing in her room following an interaction with Danny, and chiding herself for her own awkwardness as her relationship with Danny moves forward (Hall, 2014, eps. 7 & 12). In a later episode, she describes her feelings for Carmilla as the "worst crush ever," letting the audience know that she is aware of her feelings, and notably is more concerned with the consequence that may arise from her attraction to Carmilla in terms of her identity as a vampire, not as another woman (Hall, 2014, Episode 28). By making a point not to spend much time on Laura's development of her sexual orientation, Hall's adaptation successfully normalizes her identity.

One of the biggest adaptive changes that Hall's *Carmilla* makes is in the character interpretation of Mlle. de Lafontaine. In Hall's adaptation, Mademoiselle is reimagined as Susan Lafontaine, the "unofficial truth speaker" of Laura's dorm floor (Hall, 2014, Episode 4). Lafontaine's gender identity and presentation greatly differ from the Mademoiselle of Le Fanu's novella. Le Fanu's Mademoiselle's physical appearance is not described throughout the novella, making it difficult to closely compare the difference between their appearances. However, as her appearance is not described as any more masculine than the other women in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and understanding the cultural norms in the novella were rarely transgressed by anyone but Carmilla and Laura, it is a relatively safe assumption that Lafontaine in Hall's adaptation is more

gender-neutral than Mademoiselle. They appear wearing gender-neutral or masculine dress throughout the web series, and are frequently correcting Perry when she calls them "Susan" (Hall, 2014). Lafontaine is easily read as a non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderfluid or umbrella Trans* character. As has been the theme in Hall's adaptation, the exact name for Lafontaine's gender identity is never disclosed to the audience, but there is evidence which points the audience to the conclusion that, if nothing else, Lafontaine certainly does not exclusively (if at all) identify as a woman. They are sometimes referred to with she/her/hers pronouns, but seem to prefer they/them/theirs pronouns, which are gender-neutral alternatives (Hall, 2014). Additionally, the rejection of their birth name, Susan, is an indicator to the audience that they fall somewhere within the spectrum of transgender identities. As such, Lafontaine's struggle for acceptance from their long-time best friend, Perry, becomes a more potent statement about the process of coming out and acceptance than Laura's sexual orientation development, or lack thereof.

Lafontaine's character also contributes to one of the web series' more subtle deconstructions of the gender binary. Throughout the web series, the main cast refers to the vampire clan's collection of victims for the sacrifice as "taking girls" (Hall, 2014). (There will be a more in depth discussion of the cultural implications of this phrasing in the section below titled "The Vampire and Rape Culture".) For most of the series, it is assumed that the vampires are only selecting young, virgin women as sacrifices because of their femininity and the traditional link between femininity, virginity, and purity. This raises questions about the legitimacy of Lafontaine's gender identity to the narrative of the series when they are selected as a sacrifice in the episode "Required Reading," as revealed by Perry's discovery of a notecard from the Dean, which cites "She [Lafontaine] meddled in things that were none of her business" as the primary

reason they were taken (Hall, 2014, Episode 27). The use of she/her/hers pronouns for Lafontaine is not out of the ordinary for the series, but in conjunction with the cast's understanding of the situation as only targeting female students, this plot progression creates a momentary assumption that Lafontaine's sex assigned at birth--female--is a more determinate factor in their social identity as recognized by the Dean than their actual gender identity. However, in the episode "Mommy Dearest," the Dean possesses Laura's body and explains to Carmilla that neither virginity nor femininity are requirements for the selection of sacrifices (Hall, 2014, Episode 32). The Dean explains, "We just take girls because it's traditional. Besides, the world is just going to grind them up anyway, so it's almost a mercy" (Hall, 2014, Episode 32). With this information, she offers to trade Kirsch as a sacrifice instead of Laura for Carmilla (Hall, 2014, Episode 32). Consequently, this reclaims Lafontaine's gender ambiguity as well. Their sex assigned at birth may not have been the only factor that determined their eligibility for victimhood. In this way, Lafontaine's queer identity is becomes the keystone in understanding the argument Hall's *Carmilla* makes about the ungendered nature of tragedy.

Bisexuality and pansexuality are also present in Hall's *Carmilla* where they are not explicitly included in the original text. The representation is, however, problematic at best. Bisexual behaviors are seen in Sarah Jane and Natalie-- two original characters to Hall's adaptation. They are both potential sacrifices for the Dean's ritual, and have been vampirically infected, causing them to have an insatiable need to party (Hall, 2014). Bisexuality seems to be a side effect of the infection, as the girls suddenly reappear in the episode "The Real Betty," flirtatiously interacting with both male and female characters. There was no indication in their earlier or post-ritual appearances that either Natalie or Sarah Jane had any romantic interest in either men or women. This plot point problematically aligns bisexuality with promiscuity and

performance/attention, both of which have been connected to negative stereotypes about bisexual individuals in media representations.

In comparing Hall's adaptation to Le Fanu's novella, this study has found that queer identity was more frequently observed in the web series, but held an equally ambiguously valence in both iterations of the text. The effect of this ambiguity does slightly vary between the two. For Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, the effect is that the reader questions whether either Laura or Carmilla is actually sexually attracted to one another or if their relationship is solely pragmatic for Carmilla's need to prey and Laura's vulnerability. For Hall's adaptation, the lack of explicit explanation for the specific types of queer identities normalizes the queer behaviors of all the characters.

Systems of Oppression for Queerness and Femininity

The second finding of this study was that there were major differences between the systems of oppression at play between the two interpretations of *Carmilla*. The three major systems to be discussed are patriarchy, patriarchal motherhood, and bureaucracy. I found that while these three systems appear in different ratios in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hall's adaptation, their purposes are the same: to silence queerness and femininity in their respective settings. I also discovered that a major difference between Hall's *Carmilla* and the original text is the presence of resistance towards oppressive structures as an emerging theme.

As a product of the gothic period, it is unsurprising that the patriarchy is a major narrative force and presence in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. Patriarchy, which refers to the cultural tendency to defer to older male figures to make decisions that affect an entire group, can be seen at every level of storytelling. As earlier explained to, the patriarchy can even be seen embedded in the style of Le Fanu's work. In terms of emergent themes, the patriarchy on the narrative level is

presented in a very straightforward manner. Laura reveals in the first chapter that her mother died so long ago that she is unable to even remember her, and has lived with her father her entire life (Le Fanu, 1872). Laura goes on to describe her father as "the kindest man on earth, but growing old..." (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 5). This is perhaps an easy claim for Laura to make, as it is reiterated multiple times throughout the text that she does not have much exposure to any people outside her father and governesses, but her father's benevolence is shown in his hospitality to Carmilla and his concern for Laura's wellbeing (Le Fanu, 1872). Laura's filial respect for her father is maintained throughout the text, as she defends his decisions to Carmilla on more than one occasion and returns to a normal life with him at the novella's end (Le Fanu, 1872). Laura's father does, however, exercise his patriarchal imposition of power at times as well. This power is mostly in the form of strategic information sharing and withholding. For example, Laura's father is privy to the information that Carmilla is truly a vampire much sooner than Laura is. Sensing that he is keeping something from her, Laura asks her father what he thinks is happening to her as she is becoming weaker under Carmilla's influence (Le Fanu, 1872). He answers, "You must not plague me with questions... You shall know all about it in a day or two..." (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 63). Although his intentions are to protect his daughter from potential emotional injury or trauma, by keeping this information from her, he is actually worrying her more and removing her from the decision process about how to handle the perceived threat of Carmilla. Laura's father is an example of the way in which patriarchy can seem benevolent, but is characterized by the privilege of exercising authority whenever he sees fit.

Less directly, the other male figures who appear in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* also represent a distinctly patriarchal aspect to the text. General Speilisdorf is treated as a peer of Laura's father. The General is involved in the ultimate murder of Carmilla in the chapel of the old Castle

Karnstein, and is regarded with respect by Laura's father, as his efforts have successfully protected the innocence, youth, and ultimately, the life of his daughter. Having lost a ward himself to Carmilla's vampiric desires, the General's murdering of Carmilla is seen as a redemptive act—an act which repays death with death. Despite the General's protection of purity as a cause of celebration for her father, Laura herself remains unaware of his actions until just before Carmilla's corpse is gruesomely destroyed. She writes, "Of the scene that had occurred in the ruined chapel, no explanation was offered to me, and it was clear that it was a secret which my father for the present was determined to keep from me" (Le Fanu, 2013, pp. 91). In this way, the General and Laura's father are able to control the information that Laura receives, and by extension control Laura's view of the world.

A literal incarnation of patriarchy is not emphasized in Hall's *Carmilla*. Laura's father is mentioned on more than one occasion, and he is characterized as overprotective and paranoid about safety concerns, but Laura's father never appears on screen (Hall, 2014). One of the effects of the shift in setting to a university from the home is that it marks a distancing between the patriarch and the patronized. The university becomes a site of Laura's liberation, but reminds the audience that just because she is not interacting directly with her father does not mean that he is still not able to exert power over her from a distance. Laura's father provides her with a collection of self-defense tools—for example bear spray—but forbids her from owning a smart phone out of fear that she will use the phone camera to "send high resolution selfies to stalkers" (Hall, 2014, Episode 2). While Laura's father is still well intentioned, in that he wants to keep his daughter safe, the preoccupation with safety he shows actually hinders Laura's understanding of the reality in which she lives, similar to the effect found in Le Fanu's work.

Patriarchy is perhaps more clearly represented in Hall's adaptation through the inclusion of the fraternity, Zeta Omega Mu. The Zetas, Will and Kirsch, are represented as a hyper-masculine collective who "...have decided it is uncool that hotties might feel unsafe going to parties or making their walks of shame at 4 AM and as so have decided to personally protect any coed 7.5 or higher" (Hall, 2014, Episode 7). The Zetas instate a "dudescort" [sic] (the combination of the word "dude" and the word "escort"), which pairs undergraduate women they deem attractive enough with one of their members to walk her from class to class (Hall, 2014, Episode 8). This pairing emphasizes the ways in which the world Laura lives in is heteronormative, even if she and her friends are not. Additionally, it more overtly asserts that the reason that women need protecting from harm is because of their potential to visually and sexually satisfy men.

Another oppressive structure that appears in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is the concept of patriarchal motherhood. Patriarchal motherhood, a term coined for the purposes of this analysis, refers to the imposition of patriarchal values from a distinctly motherly character. In combining patriarchy with motherhood, feminine voices are used rhetorically to reinforce the will of the patriarch. This differs from matriarchy because it still values masculine, heteronormative perspectives. Patriarchal motherhood can be seen in Le Fanu's work in his use of the characters of Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle de Lafontaine. These characters, employed by Laura's father, serve to care for Laura, but only in the ways prescribed by the patriarch. As such, they become very minor characters, whose actions are limited by their lack of agency.

In comparison, Perry and Lafontaine are major actors in Hall's adaptation. They are not characterized by patriarchal motherhood, as they are not portrayed as Laura's mother figures. While it is true that Hall's Laura never mentions a birth mother of her own, it is clear that neither

Perry nor Lafontaine are meant to be replace this. To achieve this, Hall has reduced the age of these characters in adaptation to be only a few years older than Laura, and as such her relative equals.

Rather, patriarchal motherhood can be seen in the figure of the Dean, whom Carmilla identifies as her vampire mother, “not [her] birth mother, but the mother [she] knew after death” (Hall, 2014, Episode 20). The Dean is the head figure of Silas University, and the head of Carmilla’s vampire clan, but she is not a true matriarch, as her power is not ultimate within the institution, and furthermore she is shown to have misogynistic actions and behaviors that do not align with matriarchy. The Dean acts as an agent for the light demon the clan sacrifices to, and as such cares little for the fate of the students she is meant to be representing as Dean of Students.

Perhaps more telling to the cultural shift that exists between the novella and its adaptation is the Dean’s more active participation in the te final oppressive structure this study identifies: bureaucracy. While there is little evidence of bureaucratic structure in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, its constant presence and overwhelming importance in Hall’s adaptation make it a topic this analysis could not ignore. The bureaucracy of the University is not lost on Laura, as she begins the series trying to work within the system to find out what happened to Betty. However, it soon becomes apparent through the multiple choice student exit card and her unproductive phone calls with administrators that Silas University is a place where bureaucracy far overpowers social justice (Hall, 2014). Bureaucracy becomes an obstacle, which must be overcome in order to claim any justice for the missing students at Silas. Interestingly, there is nothing overtly gendered in the manifestation of bureaucracy at Silas University, making it a more societal representation of oppression. The inclusion of such a system of oppression makes it clear to the audience that while the features of these systems may change; their oppressive effect does not. In other words,

the bureaucracy of Silas University adds to Hall's adaptation a level of oppression equal, but different than the patriarchal oppression found in Le Fanu's novella.

I found that the representation of oppressive structures was present in both iterations of *Carmilla*. The presence of patriarchy was more removed and less literal in the adaptation than in the novella. In both texts, there was the presence of patriarchal motherhood, but this form of oppression was mainly used to underscore the importance of the more active oppressive forces in the respective texts. Finally, the adaptation's inclusion of bureaucracy as an obstacle to equality and justice allows the audience to see the ways in which oppressive structures have become more institutionalized in the present day.

The vampire and rape culture

Like most examples of media in the horror or dark fantasy genres, the vampire tale is cautionary one. In its early conceptions, the vampire was often seen as a caution against heterosexual liberation, so the importance of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* featuring a female vampire with female victims should not lose its effect to present day readers. In many ways, the vampire represents rape in that the act of a vampire preying involves the exertion of power in a way that violates the body of the victim. Additionally, the symbolism of penetration and blood point to a reading of the violence of virginity loss in these types of texts. *Carmilla*, in this way, is read as a rapist. She represents a single, self-contained threat to Laura's virginity, purity and heterosexuality.

In Hall's adaptation, by comparison, a single rapist is no longer the biggest threat to women or non-masculine people. Instead, the web series shows the ways in which a rape culture more violently threatens the safety of marginalized people than does the presence of any one single rapist. This can be seen for example, in the more present vampire clan in Hall's adaption. While it can be assumed that *Carmilla*'s mother is also a vampire in the original text, the idea is never explored. This is starkly contrasting to the way in which the Dean and Will appear throughout the web series to reinforce that this iteration of vampirism involves many unnamed, unseen actors, even beyond those who do appear. Vampirism thereby becomes institutionalized, as well.

The rape culture of Silas University is also reinforced by the use of partying, as it is associated with university life, as a plot device in *Carmilla* (2014). By making engaging in partying a side effect of vampiric selection for the sacrificial ritual, Hall's adaptation

problematizes victim blaming and associations of promiscuity with rape. Once a student is selected as a potential sacrifice to the light demon Carmilla's vampire clan worships, their "world narrows to celebration" and this is characterized as "weakness of the mind" (Hall, 2014, Episode 28). The treatment of partying in this adaptation positions alcohol consumption as a punishable offense for women who are not vigilant about their surroundings.

While the world in which Laura lives condones this perpetuation of rape culture, Laura refuses to be a bystander, and instead dedicates her time and efforts to finding ways to empower other students, and act on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves. Again, audiences see Laura as an active agent in the deconstruction of oppression around her.

Hall's adaptation broadens and intensifies the threat of the vampire as a metaphor for rape. While Le Fanu's *Carmilla* focuses on both rape and consensual homosexuality as threats to individual purity, Hall's *Carmilla* repositions the threat as culturally reinforced social structures that rely on victim-blaming strategies to further oppress non-masculine identity.

Conclusions

Using *Carmilla* and its adaptation as a comparative case study, I found many ways in which the adaptation both serves as a standalone artifact and as an opening for dialogue regarding the constant cultural shifts that our world experiences. The present day adaptation contributes to critical understanding of Le Fanu's text and allows audiences to consider the ways that treatment of queer and feminine individuals today may not be as progressive as some may think.

Through a comparative textual analysis, it was revealed that Hall's adaptation of *Carmilla* became a text which reclaims the narrative of the Le Fanu's work by re-empowering the queer narrative voice, legitimizing queer identities and relationships, as well as

demonstrating the ways in which oppressive structures have shifted in the time between the novella's publication and the present day. In doing so, Hall's adaptation celebrates the transgressive power of queer narrative to make femininity and queerness concepts, which the audience is able to derive pleasure from viewing.

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