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The Victorian Vampire

As long as society has existed, so too have stories of monsters. Humanity loves to tell stories, especially when those stories have the ability to help rationalize and make sense of the parts of the world that can be quite frightening at times. The world is a terrifying place in which to live, and that has led to the creation of many monsters, all of which are able to symbolize different fears. And as societies have grown and changed, so too have these monsters, their meanings fluctuating as new fears enter the collective unconscious. But some monsters have demonstrated an ability to really stick around, and a wonderful example of this phenomenon is the vampire. “Belief in vampires is well documented throughout history, from the shores of Ancient Greece and Rome to the wind-swept deserts of Ancient Egypt; from Babylonia and India in the East to France and England in the West. There are vampires in Norse mythology, in the plagues and witch trials of the Middle Ages, in the seventeenth-century ‘Age of Reason’ and in the Gothic literature of Victorian England. So, too, the vampire appears in modern times, in the emerging Dark Arts of the Occult, the ever-growing Goth movement and in psychopathic ‘vampiric’ cases of torture, murder and blood-drinking across Europe.”¹ The vampire is a wide-spread monster, and throughout its time in the cultural consciousness, it has represented a myriad of fears, especially those with relation to fear of “the other” and with being turned into something other than what you are, seduced and corrupted by an outside influence. Indeed, there is so much variation in the vampire that it is frequently much easier to analyze when the scope is

¹ Beresford, “From Demons to Dracula: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth”, pg 7.

narrowed to a certain period of time. The Victorian vampire is a staple of pop culture, even many years in the future of its peak, due in part to the wide abundance of vampire literature released during that period. *Varney the Vampire*, thought to be written by James Malcolm Rymer or Thomas Peckett Prest which was published in 1847, *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872, and of course, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker which was published in 1897 are all hallmarks of the genre and reveal in each of them a good deal about the vampire of Victorian England, who they were and what they represented. Victorian England was a realm of cultural expansion, colonization and scientific advancement. Yet at the same time, there was a sizable difference between how men and women were treated in society and rampant xenophobia was lurking in the cultural consciousness of Victorian society. All of this created a wonderful breeding ground for some very specific types of vampires, shining a light on the fears of their world, and perhaps even the people who lived in it as well.

Without an understanding of what the stories are about, there is no hope for an understanding of what they represent. With this in mind, it is important to summarize. *Varney the Vampire*, the first chronologically of the three sources follows a vampire named Sir Francis Varney as he attempts to take the blood and later money of a family called the Bannerworths. Varney's vampire nature is that of preying upon others, he desires to leech away the resources of his victims until they are left with nothing, and does so through various different methods, seducing and manipulating those around him in an infinite power struggle. There is also the threat of Varney's seduction of young women, "In the opening scene of chapter One between the vampire and the girl, there appears to be an underlying sexual theme, as well as the obvious 'shock horror', something which is prominent in later 'vampiric' works"² In many ways, *Varney* paves the way for the vampires that would follow him, with this narrative being one of the first

² Beresford, "From Demons to Dracula: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth", pg 121

to highlight the sexuality of the vampire, the now-classic trope of a supernatural creature that will sneak in through the bedroom window of a young maiden and take her blood, the act itself being metaphorically sexual in nature.

Carmilla is a vampire novel which is notable in that it follows a female vampire, the titular *Carmilla*, who is really the Countess Mircalla Karnstein. In the novel, she seduces and feeds on another young girl named Laura, turning into a monstrous beast to suck her blood out through her breast as she sleeps. She is eventually killed by Laura's father and the father of another girl she seduced and fed upon and subsequently killed. *Carmilla* is a strange and unique vampire, because although she also represents the threat of the seduction of young women, her threat is markedly different because she is a woman herself. In this there is a feeling of otherness in her vampiric nature that also leads to an otherness in her sexuality, the already corrupt girl corrupting the pure one — although it is worth noting that Laura never denies *Carmilla*'s advances and in fact seems to welcome them before *Carmilla* is revealed to be a vampire. But *Carmilla* is still drawing upon all those that came before it, citing many folk mythoses about vampires in the reveal about *Carmilla* herself. "This is perhaps the most obvious example that Le Fanu did indeed use the folkloric beliefs and that, like its predecessors, it was using earlier fears and public interest as a promotional tool. Perhaps the one factor that sets *Carmilla* apart is the use of lesbianism."³ But yet, even a female vampire who was not a lesbian would be unique in this regard, as so many vampire narratives of the time are centric on a male vampire, and although he may turn and corrupt the women around him, it is still unique for a woman to be the corruptor, and perhaps more powerfully indicative of the strangeness of *Carmilla* herself.

Dracula is perhaps the most famous of the three sources. In it, Count *Dracula* moves from Hungary to England, terrorizing his solicitor Jonathan Harker with his vampiric nature, and later

³ Beresford, "From Demons to *Dracula*: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth", pg 128

seducing and turning a young English woman named Lucy Westenra, to the dismay of her three suitors, Dr. John Seward, cowboy Quincy Morris, and the wealthy Arthur Holmwood. As she falls ill, Seward calls for help from his friend Abraham Van Hellsing, a professor with knowledge of vampires. After Lucy's death, Dracula sets his sights on her friend and Harker's wife, Mina, taking her blood and feeding her with his, so that she will become a vampire in the event of her death. The five men must find and kill Dracula to save Mina, and they are successful in the quest, although Morris dies in the process. Dracula is one of the most influential vampire narratives of all time, having been adapted and retold hundreds of times. A lot of the fear of Dracula comes from ideas of reverse colonization and people from outside of England coming in to infect and influence and assimilate the people of England. "Consider the characters: the stalwart and somewhat tactless professor, the young and wholesome solicitor, the selfless doctor, the good wife who has learnt how to make a living, all who unite to combat the oppressor. For the last hundred years, Britain had been doing just that in her struggles against the French and this would continue against the Germans in the upcoming Great War. The vampiric theme has often been utilized in this way, with Turgenev and Tolstoy compiling folkloric vampire tales depicting the Cossacks and landlords as vampires in Tsarist Russia, for example."⁴ Not mentioned in this quote are the old money man and the cowboy, two men who are representative of the old and new ways in which England influences the rest of the world. All of these characters, united against the foreign element of Dracula are indicative of the fear he generates, the strangeness of Dracula as an outsider attempting to influence England.

Despite the distinctive presence of the vampires in each of these pieces the ways in which they appear vary, even in their similarities, between the three. All the vampires notably prey on young women, but their methods and reasoning are different, perhaps signifying a different

⁴ Beresford, "From Demons to Dracula: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth", pg 136

meaning in the actions of each of the vampires. In *Varney the Vampire*, Varney crawls in through a young woman named Clara's window, and he seduces her, drinking her blood and turning her into a vampire like himself. The way in which Varney targets Clara makes it clear that it is about her youth and beauty, and him corrupting that. Carmilla, throughout her narrative, exclusively targets, seduces, kills young women as a sign of her vampiric nature. Carmilla's seduction of the young women is especially insidious as she is a woman herself, and the queer desire exhibited in the narrative shows the fear that women would be seduced into lesbianism. Carmilla does not turn any of the women she targets, instead simply draining them of blood until they die, very interesting especially when contrasted through the lens of her gender as well. In *Dracula*, both the women that appear notably in the narrative are targeted by Dracula, with him crawling in Lucy's window and draining her like Varney with Clara and seducing Mina away from the men to drink her blood and have her drink his. Dracula's threat in the novel comes through the strongest when it is shown through his targeting of the women, and indeed the main reason the men of the narrative want to kill him is to save Mina and be revenged for Lucy. The ways in which these vampires are killed are also interesting. Unique in this regard is Varney, who despite being killed and then coming back to life in many ways throughout the story, finally kills himself by leaping into Mt. Vesuvius at the end. Carmilla and Dracula however, both must be killed in the same way — a stake driven through the heart followed by a beheading. This very specific method of death is fascinating when one considers it through the lens of these fears, most notably the idea of an unkillable monster as a type of threat, something that is so pervasive and inhuman that a certain set of rules must be followed to defeat it. And although the vampires are all defeated, the fear of their unkillable nature lingers all the same. It is also worth remarking the bestial nature of all three vampires. Although Varney is simply bestial in the violent ways in

which he so often kills his victims, both Carmilla and Dracula are described as being able to turn into strange beasts, with Carmilla attacking Laura in a cat-like form and Dracula taking quite often the shape of a wolf. This serves to further their inhuman nature, demonstrating that they are not completely human as well as not completely mortal, that they can appear in strange shapes and commit the violence of beasts. A fear of a beast in a domestic setting is something that can be shown through Victorian sensibilities of propriety to be in line with this idea that the inhuman vampire is invading the social space for the delicate human sensibilities of his victims. One of the most notable and fascinating places in which the vampires of the narratives vary is their status as an outsider. Although Varney is a strange man for certain, he is generally accepted into society and is an Englishman originally, his backstory centering on him contracting the curse of vampirism after betraying a royalist to Oliver Cromwell. Varney, instead of representing a fear of foreigners, represents a fear of what may be lurking underneath the veneer of polite society, a strange outsider who is still part of the overall group you come from. Carmilla is not English, but the story that she is in actually takes place in Austria, although Laura and her father are both English. Carmilla herself is also brought into the story as a mysterious stranger, and she is shrouded in an air of otherness from the very beginning. This air only gets more prominent as her story unfolds and it is revealed that she has gone through many fake identities and been many different people throughout the course of her life, demonstrating a kind of untrustworthiness in her character. Carmilla is not only an outsider, but she is an outsider who is lying about her true nature and identity in more ways than one. Dracula is a foreigner who comes to England, and this is an important and notable part of the entire narrative, with him being introduced as a Hungarian count. Dracula comes from a non-English place to infect the people, the women of England and turn them into vampires. His strangeness and otherness exists not only in the

aspects of his vampiric nature, but also the aspects of his foreignness, with the linking of the power and immortality of vampires to the soil of their homeland even being a vital part of the narrative, cementing Dracula as a foreigner even as they showcase his inhumanity. Through all of this, it stands to reason that Varney is perhaps the most difficult to diagnose with a unique fear — but both Carmilla and Dracula are able to stand out in the strangeness they convey.

Out of the three narratives presented, Varney is the most difficult to diagnose with a unique fear. Varney seems to mostly depend upon things that are now thought of as the most classic of vampire tropes, but at the time of its publication, these tropes were not a well established aspect of the vampire as they now are. Varney was the originator of many famous and now common vampiric tropes, and this is what makes its stand out quality something that can be glazed over. Varney is written and portrayed as a sympathetic vampire. Not only is he creating fear through his actions towards the other characters, unlike the other vampires, he is also meant to experience a sort of fear in the narrative that the reader could potentially see themselves in, the fear of ostracization. Varney's unique fear stems not only from the fact that he is a superhuman vampire, but that he does not wish to be. His fear of his own power and later disillusionment with being a vampire makes it a more interesting fear through his inability to truly be a part of society, even as he destroys and undermines it, for he cannot help his nature. He is ostracized for parts of himself that he cannot help. When Varney's backstory is finally revealed, the reader learns that after being turned, he killed his son, a horrific act which makes him all the more monstrous — and all the more sympathetic. "As the realization of what this means dawns on the vampire, as is apparent in Varney, it starts to despair and crave friendship or love. This leads to a second stage, where the vampire is in need of revivification, either through this love or through the quenching of its thirst for blood."⁵ The sympathy which Varney evokes

⁵ Beresford, "From Demons to Dracula: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth", pg 123

makes the fear created by him all the more powerful, because is not simply a monster, taking actions out of genuine enjoyment but a monster who wishes to be not what he is. He can exist in the English society, blending in and lurking underneath the veneer of normalcy, but he will always know he is not like the others, always living in fear of being found out. He is both a creator of fear and the victim of it.

Carmilla's most unique fear represented is that of specifically lesbian seduction of innocent young women. Carmilla, as both a queer woman and a vampire, stands in opposition to the heteropatriarchy of Victorian England. Laura, drawn in by Carmilla as she is, does not really play an active hand in Carmilla's defeat, nor is it ever indicated that she has a strong desire to dispose of her. No, that responsibility falls on the heads of the male characters, her father and the father of another girl who was once the target of Carmilla's monstrous affections. Carmilla's threat is also, like the threat of Varney as an Englishman vampire, that she is not what she seems. "Carmilla is then able to pass as both a human and a heterosexual because of the dominant assumptions of the world she lives in and she uses both of these to her advantage, passing through the world without being seen for what she truly is until she comes to stay with Laura. Her ability to 'pass' is emphasized by the sheer volume of damning evidence presented against her that is presented to the reader even before the characters in the story catch on."⁶ Carmilla's vampirism and lesbianism compliment each other, because through both of them, it is demonstrated that she is preying on Laura, not only taking her blood but attempting to take her innocence, seducing her into romantic situations with another woman. The fear of Carmilla as a vampire is only expedited by the fear of her as a queer woman. This is not to say that Carmilla does not have other strange behaviors, her nocturnal proclivities, unexplained appearance, and

⁶ Wei, "Adaptable Monsters: The Past, Present, and Future of the Vampire Narrative as a Metaphor for Marginalized Groups", pg 36

the strange so-called hallucinations of her covered in blood that Laura has all feel like they would be more centered in a vampiric narrative, and yet they are simply other quirks of Carmilla's strangeness until her true nature is revealed. Even as the end of the novel follows the defeat of Carmilla as a vampire, most of the narrative — even with her strange behaviors throughout — is about her romantic pursuit of Laura and that is most of all what Laura fixates on, indeed being more worried about how to respond to Carmilla's romantic advances. "Carmilla is a story in which one type of abnormality is tied up in another kind of abnormality and Carmilla's vampirism only marks her as even more separate from the normative, heterosexual woman lest her sexuality be mistaken for or deemed acceptable. Making her a monster at once excuses her lesbianism by judging her against a nonhuman scale, and condemns it by passing moral judgment on her and killing her to contain the threat of abnormality."⁷ Not only is Carmilla turning and draining in the classic vampiric fashion, she is also seducing her, affecting her in a way that cannot be cured simply through Carmilla's death. The queer romantic feelings that Laura seems to maybe return towards Carmilla will not be vanquished quite as easily as the vampire trying to kill her. Laura never fully recovers from what has happened to her. "It was long before the terror of recent events subsided; 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 door."⁸ Even after Carmilla's death, Laura continues to think of her, to hold on to the memories, even as she now knows Carmilla's true nature. In this, it seems almost that Carmilla succeeded in "turning" Laura in at least one way, and that she now harbors queer romantic desire for the vampire. Even though the

⁷ Wei, "Adaptable Monsters: The Past, Present, and Future of the Vampire Narrative as a Metaphor for Marginalized Groups", pg 34

⁸ Le Fanu, "Carmilla", pg 86

men believe that killing Carmilla will fix Laura, once that door is opened, it perhaps can never be closed, and Laura may now forever think about Carmilla in this fixated way.

Dracula's unique fear representation stems from the Victorian era fear of reverse colonization, the idea of the Western world being the colonized and not the colonizers. In Dracula, not only is the titular vampire preying on and turning exclusively English women, he is doing all this as a foreigner from Eastern Europe. "The ambiguity underscores the impossibility of untangling the two aspects of Dracula's essential nature, since his vampirism is interwoven with his status as a conqueror and invader."⁹ Dracula is notable in his power. Both Dracula and Varney are very powerful vampires, possessing great health and even a kind of super strength. Compared to Carmilla, who is shown to be suffering from a mysterious illness, it is clear that they are both intended to be more powerful as an addition to their threat. Although there is also something to be said for Carmilla being the only woman out of the three. Dracula is trying to conquer and dominate his victims. "His attacks involve more than an assault on the isolated self, the subversion and loss of one's individual identity. Again unlike Polidori's Count Ruthven or Le Fanu's Carmilla (or even Thomas Prest's Sir Francis Varney), Dracula imperils not simply his victims' personal identities, but also their cultural, political, and racial selves. In Dracula vampirism designates a kind of colonization of the body. Horror arises not because Dracula destroys bodies, but because he appropriates and transforms them."¹⁰ Although the other vampires of the time did turn people, Dracula seems to have the turning of people, especially young women as his main focus. He is making these women like him, turning them vampiric to be of him and othering them by infecting them with his blood. And it is worth noting that Dracula's specific target is the women. Because the people he is infecting with his vampirism are

⁹ Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: "Dracula" and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization", pg 628

¹⁰ Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: "Dracula" and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization", pg 630

specifically women, there are lines that can be drawn to reproduction and the infection of not only a single person, but an entire bloodline. "Mina, the men fear, is perfectly capable of producing "offspring," but not with Jonathan. The prohibition guarding Mina is linked to the fear of vampiric fecundity, a fecundity that threatens to overwhelm the far less prolific British men. Thus, as many critics have pointed out, the arrival of little Quincey Harker at the story's close signals the final triumph over Dracula, since the Harkers' ability to secure an heir - an heir whose racial credentials are seemingly impeccable - is the surest indication that the vampire's threat has been mastered."¹¹ The fact that Mina and Jonathan have a child at the end of the book shows they have defeated Dracula to an even stronger degree than their simple killing of him, as they have also completely removed his influence from the world. He will not be able to reproduce the way they have, his reproduction being the infection of these women with his vampiric abilities, thereby implying that they are offspring would also be vampiric and of him. But at the same time, although this is within the text a positive thing, there is something rather unsettling about Dracula, the other, the foreigner, being restricted from reproducing. To grapple with the fear of reverse colonization that Dracula is built upon is to grapple with the racism inherent in the Victorian British Empire. There is also the fact that not only is Dracula draining Lucy Westenra's blood, he is also draining, through her, the blood of the men who are giving her transfusions in order to keep her alive. Doctor Seward, wealthy Holmwood, professor Van Helsing, and cowboy Morris all take turns donating their blood to Lucy, and in return Dracula sucks it out, replacing it with his own infection. Not only is he infecting the women, spreading his vampiric disease into England, but he is also draining the resources of the men, taking their blood as quickly as it is transfused into Lucy. "The men give blood in this order: Holmwood, Seward, Van Helsing, Morris. Arthur Holmwood is first choice ostensibly because he is engaged to Lucy, but also, and

¹¹ Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: "Dracula" and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization", pg 631

perhaps more importantly, because his blood is, in Van Helsing's words, "more good than" Seward's. As the only English aristocrat in the novel, Holmwood possesses a "blood so pure" that it can restore Lucy's compromised racial identity. Dr. Seward, whose blood though bourgeois is English nonetheless, comes next in line, followed by the two foreigners, Van Helsing and Morris."¹² The order of these men not only demonstrates the racial or cultural identity based hierarchy that already exists in the society of Victorian England, but also the othering of even the heroic characters in the narrative in some instances, with Van Helsing appearing suspicious in his knowledge of vampires and Morris perishing at the end of the narrative. The Englishman is not free from the trappings of hierarchy he fancies himself at the top of, even as Dracula, like Carmilla, is easily able to impersonate an Englishman, a normal and upstanding member of the society. "The truly disturbing notion is not that Dracula impersonates Harker, but that he does it so well. Here indeed is the nub: Dracula can "pass." To impersonate an Englishman, and do it convincingly, is the goal of Dracula's painstaking research into "English life and customs and manners," a goal Dracula himself freely, if rather disingenuously, acknowledges."¹³ He is researched and practiced in the art of imitating an Englishman, and finds it easy to blend in. This is the fear still then, throughout all three narratives. There is a monster hidden, lurking under the veneer of society, and they are there to infect and twist the good and innocent.

Vampires are a fascinating monster, with a sticking power to the point where they have remained culturally relevant for hundreds of years. "There are many reasons why the vampire has remained in our conscious thought over time, but the one common element to almost all cases of vampirism is fear. Fear is an important factor in the survival of the vampire because, although the vampire has taken various forms in history, it is difficult to pinpoint one dominant

¹² Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: "Dracula" and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization", pg 632

¹³ Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: "Dracula" and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization", pg 638

form; fear is the main unifying feature, and therefore can be said to provide the key to the vampire's existence. One might say that fear of the vampire's existence is more important than its actual existence."¹⁴ The fears that they represent may have changed since the Victorian era, but the love for many of these narratives has not. Dracula is a pop-culture hallmark and referenced in hundreds of books, movies, TV shows, and other media. Carmilla is no stranger to the limelight either. She has been adopted into an icon of the queer community and used in many vampiric stories to represent queer desire. even sometimes another And Varney, although he may not be appearing himself as frequently in recent media, is a trailblazer of the sympathetic vampire, which in more recent years has gripped the cultural imagination and caused vampires to not only be a monster that you fear but perhaps also a monster that you desire. There is a potency in the vampire, a creature that has existed for so long that it will always be a part of the cultural consciousness. There will always be vampires, lurking there under the veneer of a polite society. Always something to be afraid of in the dark.

¹⁴ Beresford, "From Demons to Dracula: Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth", pg 10

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