

FEMALE VAMPIRES, MASCULINE ANXIETY AND NATURE: THE ECOLOGICAL
GOTHIC OF SHERIDAN LE FANU'S *CARMILLA*

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"Creator! *Nature!*" said the young lady in answer to my gentle father.
"And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things
proceed from Nature--don't they? All things in the heaven, in the earth,
and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so."

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

In this passage from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella *Carmilla*, the vampire Carmilla refutes the assertion that all things come from the mind of a benevolent creator and instead argues the notion of dispassionate nature as an alternative origin. What is significant in Carmilla's counterargument is that Carmilla's nature is indifferent to humans; it is the source of the disease that is killing the young women in the novella. Of course, this particular disease is no ordinary one, for Carmilla is actually referring to her own vampirism; it is she who has attacked and slaughtered the women. Whereas many would consider these attacks supernatural, Carmilla's controversial assertion asks us to consider vampirism within a natural framework. Vampires in *Carmilla* become both a competing species in the struggle for survival and symbols of nature itself. The novella thus embodies post-Darwinian concerns by de-centering humanity.

The publication of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories in *On the Origin of Species* (1852) rattled English religious foundations, leaving English peoples questioning their dominance over the natural world. Le Fanu's vampire Carmilla was a reflection of this anxiety as she challenges patriarchal human power. In essence, all monsters are composed of cultural fears, as argued by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his work "Monster Theory (Seven Theses)." He asserts, "the monster is born only at a metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, a place" (4). Nina Auerbach agrees that this applies to vampires; she argues that the construction of the vampire changes in accordance with the political and social issues of the time period, and that vampires are reflections of the social atmosphere they are produced from (32). The Victorian vampire challenged patriarchal systems of class

relationships and civility with their efforts to find prey—regardless of social class—as well as their disobedience to social codes (6). Carmilla embodies the cultural anxieties of Victorian England because her predatory nature challenges European civility as well as English dominance. Furthermore, the fact that Carmilla is a female vampire further complicates these themes, suggesting that the feminized natural world will challenge masculine dominance over nature, especially since the vampire is a *progression* of a human body that is reanimated into a stronger being. This hints to evolutionary progression, as vampires are a stronger, predatory species, one that feeds on the weaker human species. The Victorian vampire can be seen as an extension of anxieties regarding evolution and nature, and through Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*,¹ readers can see this anxiety take shape through the vampire's relationship with nature and humans. Thus, I will argue that the female vampire Carmilla contests the Victorian ideal of patriarchic dominance over nature, appearing to be a new step in the evolutionary chain and overpowering the human race. Darwin's controversial wedge metaphor highlights a symbolic fight between Carmilla and the human species. In turn, this attack from the female vampire emphasizes the Victorian anxieties of patriarchic dominance in general.

Humans once believed they were the most powerful creatures on the face of the earth with God-granted rights to the land, its animals, and its resources, but evolutionary science was beginning to reveal that humans were nothing more than another species in competition with others (Diniejko 1). Victorian England asked itself, are we truly the dominant species, and can our species be subject to devolution and/or extinction? And while humans are currently the most dominate species on the planet, capable of manipulating nature for housing, agriculture,

¹ Textual citations and references in this essay are from the Oxford University edition of *In A Glass Darkly* (1999).

exploration, and domestication, might they be pushed to extinction by a more powerful species? In “Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Novel,” Patrick Brantlinger argues that Victorian fiction reflected concerns about human regression or devolution, especially when exposed to the primitive peoples of colonized lands. This theory asserts that even the most civilized peoples can be subject to devolution or “going native” when exposed to less-civilized peoples (234-235). What’s fascinating about this Victorian fear is the way that it emphasizes the instability of human civility, suggesting that English culture is not permanent in the presence of less-civilized humans. I also argue that Le Fanu’s novella highlights the fear of losing dominance over the natural, but not through devolution. Rather, it would be through the evolution of a new species, one more powerful than humans, and one that could potentially overthrow English dominance. In essence, the constant battle between species encroached on Victorian England, making the public recognize the possibility that humans are subject to nature, and not nature subject to humans.

The fear of evolution certainly plays into the creation of the vampire Carmilla. The monsters that appear in literature are symbolic of the culture they stem from, encompassing an anxiety that the culture finds difficult to confront. Cohen claims that the monster is, first and foremost, a cultural body composed of multiple components: “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture” (4). Like Cohen’s “monster,” the vampire Carmilla encompasses the evolution anxiety that is prevalent in Victorian England. In essence, the Victorians believed that God granted man dominance, for man was made in his image; without this belief, humans could be just another animal species. And if humans were, as Darwin implied, just another species, what became of faith in a divine creator?

Darwin himself questioned the reality of a creator of all life on earth, particularly due to the existence of parasites, and he expressed this issue in a letter to a friend, where he uses the example of a parasitic insect killing a caterpillar:

I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [parasitic insect] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. (64)

Similar to the parasite, the vampire is a parasitic creature that lives upon the “living bodies” of humans; they are symbolic of this parasite/caterpillar relationship and humans are simply the prey that sustains the vampire bodies. Thus, *Carmilla* brings out the very issues that Darwin found most troubling regarding evolution. Theories that preceded 1859 were *teleological*, based on the idea that all species were evolving toward perfection. Christian doctrine also considered the human race the most dominant, perfect race, entirely different from all other animals on the earth and given the rights and powers to dominate nature (Diniejko 2). Darwin was skeptical of these perspectives, and questioned the “final purpose of evolution” (Shanks 3). Thus, Darwin began to construct a new and controversial vision of evolution; rather than to create a more perfect species, evolution involved the struggle for survival, the “survival of the fittest,” to maintain the propagation of the species in a world full of competing species. This theory also maintains that this struggle will be continuous: there’s no guarantee that one species’ dominance will last forever, for a more powerful species may cause extinction.

In the first edition of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin included a metaphor of survival that was rich with graphic imagery, enforcing readers to envision an account that is rife with aggressive rhetoric. The wedge metaphor, removed from subsequent editions, typifies this violent view of natural selection:

In looking at Nature, it is most necessary to keep the fore-going considerations always in mind—never to forget that every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers; that each lives by a struggle at some period of its life; that heavy destruction inevitably falls either on the young or old, during each generation or at recurrent intervals. Lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount. The face of Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force. (119)

Darwin chose to remove the wedge metaphor without stating his reason, but the mysterious wedge metaphor continues to be discussed today for its graphic, anthropomorphic description of survival. In her work *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983), Gillian Beer comments on this violent imagery:

The drive towards actualization has created an image so grotesque, so disturbingly figurative of violence, in which the barriers between earth and body have so far vanished that the wedge image has become shockingly sadistic in a way that effaces its argumentative usefulness. Emotionally, it does correspond to Darwin's most somber sense of the individual within the natural order, but the progressive condensations of language over the various versions have here resulted in an image of uncontrollably intense and repellant anthropomorphism. (72)

Beer's description draws attention to the violent intrusion of wedges that fight to sustain their stability in Nature's pliant surface, but the rhetoric also suggests human action, or as Beer suggests anthropomorphism, whereas the wedge is physically thrust into a surface by an allegorical arm. Sonia Stephens also comments on the "warfare" imagery that the wedge metaphor produces, noting that the wedges "that stay in the yielding surface are species that survive, but to stick into the surface they presumably have to pop other wedges out" (2). She further explores the violent possibilities in the wedge metaphor, noting that "seedlings need to overcome 'enemy' seedlings in a competition for space, and males compete for females in sexual selection" (2). The wedges signify that while a species is burying itself as deep as possible into Nature's pliant surface, it is pushing out other species' wedges, fighting for space within the

limited space of Nature's surface. The wedge metaphor explicitly details the violent fight for survival that humans experience against the threat of other species, but it also re-imagines nature as a "pliant surface" that seems subordinate to this penetration. In other words, Nature is written as an agentless substance that is crucial for life—for species must "wedge" firmly within it—but it also lacks the ability to readjust species on its surface (these species will be readjusted by the other wedges that push them out, not Nature *herself*).

Darwin's rhetoric surrounding the natural world has often been gendered female. According to Beer, there were two implications to Darwin's gendering of nature: the first was to distinguish nature and the natural world from God. If God was the embodiment of the patriarchic structures of Victorian England, then nature was the feminine other. The femininization of nature was an effort to "ascribe a benign surveillance to the natural world" (50). In essence, feminizing nature was a method of subjugating it to scientific judgment and examination, but this was not a feature entirely unique to Darwin. Beer notes that feminine characterization of Nature was a common tradition in early modern England, and she mentions many works that used this rhetorical device. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which was frequently taught in early modern grammar schools, Deucalion is instructed to throw away the bones of his Great Mother. Feminine Nature is found in contemporary literature as well in scientific writing of the Victorian period, such as John Tyndall's philosophical works (70). Furthermore, Beer notes Ralph Colp's² speculation on the wedge metaphor's removal from subsequent editions; Colp suggests that the wedge metaphor "may have come to symbolize Darwin's assertion of himself in the areas of work, sex, money, and resistance to opposition" (71). The irony of the

² Beer is referring to Colp's "Charles Darwin's Vision of Organic Nature," published in the *New York State Journal of Medicine*, September 1979.

wedge metaphor is the phallic stake that is thrust into the feminine Nature (with a anthropomorphic capital 'N'), highlighting a gendered relationship between the masculine wedge and feminine Nature's "pliant" surface." This metaphor also highlights psychoanalytic theories of phallic power, which showcase the androcentric language to express human existence.

The wedge metaphor and the gendering of nature are significant for readers of *Carmilla*, and Le Fanu's writing reflects anthropomorphic and androcentric tendencies that are common in Victorian discourse. According to W.J. McCormack, Le Fanu's depictions of nature follow a pattern common to much of the Victorian rhetoric regarding nature:

[Le Fanu's] view of the world is man-centered, and his depiction of nature essentially anthropomorphic. In the early *Purcell Papers* landscape is used conventionally as a mirror of human society; the sap is falling, the woods are stricken, mortal decay lies over all. By the 1860s, however, Le Fanu's treatment of landscape has become less predictable, because his view of it is no longer simple and unitary. It may appear either as a series of static scenes, presented virtually as artifacts through the framing devices of window or estate wall, or as a nervously quivering enemy to man, treacherous with revelation. This dichotomy in nature extends into every aspect of Le Fanu's work, and ultimately appears as open conflict. (191)

Le Fanu's anthropomorphism and androcentrism are not uncommon, and this language is frequently found in many works of literature in Victorian England. But, as McCormack suggests, Le Fanu's use of nature becomes far more complex, and further shows through *Carmilla* how feminine nature can overpower and exploit the human species. *Carmilla* was written after Le Fanu's view of nature had changed, and this "open conflict" is apparent through *Carmilla*'s characterization. The novella shows a distinct complexity within the human relationship with nature, and explores how humans may be subject to feminine nature's power, rather than dominant over nature.

What remains significant in Darwin's wedge metaphor is that Darwin chose the wedge to symbolically describe the struggles of nature. Granted, we may never know why Darwin chose

the wedge image to describe survival—and never know why he chose to remove it—but the metaphor could be a semblance of psychoanalytic theory of phallic power.³ The physical description of a wedge offers more insight to its phallic symbolism as well as its connection to the stake as a weapon against vampirism: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the wedge is “a piece of wood, metal, or other hard material, thick at one end and tapering to a thin edge at the other; chiefly used as a tool operated by percussion (or, less frequently, pressure) applied to the thick end, for splitting wood, stone, etc., forcing apart contiguous objects, dilating a fissure or cavity, tightening or securing some part of a structure, raising a heavy body, and other similar purposes” (1). Furthermore, the wedge is also another term for knives, chisels, or any other tools used for cutting or piercing. By looking closely at the wedge theory’s context, it shows that human dominance is not without its own insecurities. The wedge symbol is ultimately a weapon used to thrust into the pliant surface, but also to ward off other species and to assert dominion. But ultimately this image is violent, highlighting the brutality of existence, and further shows how dominance is a constant struggle. The wedge itself also represents the stake, one of the most well known weapons used to kill vampires. Staking was one of most popular methods of killing vampires in folklore, especially in Germany, Serbia, the Baltic States, and southern Slavic cultures. Various forms of wood were preferred for staking, such as ash, hawthorn, or oak, and were generally inserted in the chest, and less commonly in the mouth. Staking was used in order

³ In psychoanalytical theory, the phallus does not entirely represent the penis, but represents the symbolic phallus of power. Sigmund Freud argued that when young boys desire their mother, they recognize that the mother lacks a penis. The boys then fear that the woman has been punished, and her penis removed, beginning the “phallic stage” of the boy’s growth period. On the other hand, women experience “penis envy” when they recognize that they lack the penis (136). Jacques Lacan argues that men achieve the privileges of the phallus by denying the state of “the Real” (or, the pre-lingual state of being that children live within). Women, lacking the penis, never gain the privilege of the phallus and in turn are closer to nature. Thus, women encompass both a lack (not obtaining phallic privilege) and wholeness (never losing the penis or castrated) (287).

to pierce and deflate the vampire's body that had become bloated with blood, and the vampire corpse was commonly buried with pointed objects in case the body should bloat again (Barber 157-158). The body was often destroyed through other methods, such as decapitation or the removal of certain limbs, but staking was often the first step in the process of killing vampires, and ultimately was a symbolic way of enforcing dominance over the vampire body. As Michael Davis argues, "the final blow, the stake in the heart, which imposes, or re-imposes patriarchal, phallogocentric Law, as the protean feminine and its destabilizing *écriture*⁴ is literally and symbolically pinned down, her own phallic power castrated as her head is chopped off" (Davis 233). In *Carmilla*, the stake echoes Darwin's wedge, but in more than just one way. First, *Carmilla* represents the new species that threatens to push out the human wedges from the face of Nature. Secondly, *Carmilla* is forced to become the pliant surface of Nature when the male characters stake her—or thrust their own wedge—into her chest, which they do in order to relegate her back under their dominance. Thus, Le Fanu's novella reflects Darwin's wedging metaphor, detailing how *Carmilla* undermines human dominance and must be exterminated to ensure the human species' well-being.

Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla* just as Darwin's *Origin* was becoming widely popular in England. Darwin's work managed to de-center human existence, concluding that humans are not given God-granted dominance over the natural world, but are just as vulnerable as any animal or plant. Natural occurrences such as disease, predatory animals, and even natural disasters may wipe out human life, all without any discernable reason (Diniejko 3). In turn, Le Fanu continues with Darwin's de-centered human theme when he writes *Carmilla*, emphasizing the mystery and

⁴ *Écriture féminine*, a theory created by Hélène Cixous. Cixous argues that women's writing destabilizes the binaries of patriarchic logic. Patriarchic language does not allow the freedom for women to express themselves, but they can use their bodies as a means of communication (875-876).

power of natural life against human civilization. *Carmilla* was first published in 1872 in the serial journal *The Dark Blue*,⁵ and was published again in Le Fanu's short story collection *In A Glass Darkly* (1872)—over ten years after Darwin published *Origin* (Costello-Sullivan xvii). The novella was released during a period of Victorian England that was rife with existential crisis due to Darwinian evolution theories, and some works, such as Richard Jefferies's prolific *After Earth; Or, Wild England* (1885), details similar anxieties of losing dominance over nature.⁶ Although not nearly as popular as its vampiric descendant, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the novella has garnered significant criticism, scholarship, and even film adaptations. As Kathleen Costello-Sullivan argues, the novel covers many problems that were common in England:

The story's potential as a political and/or cultural metaphor, its psychological resonances, its representations of gender and sexuality, and its unusual aesthetic and narrative characteristics, to name only a few areas of interest, repeatedly invite literary criticism, forcing scholars to return to this short, complex work again and again. (xviii)

The novella's prominence in contemporary scholarship suggests that *Carmilla* still holds literary significance that keeps it a fixture of English Gothic literature.

⁵ *The Dark Blue* was a British pre-Raphaelite periodical that was published from 1871-1873. Established by Oxford undergraduate John Christian Freund, *The Dark Blue* hosted numerous well-known writers such as Le Fanu, William Morris, W.S. Gilbert, Andrew Lang, Thomas Hughes, A.C. Swinburne, Edward Dowden, Ford Madox Brown, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, Simeon Solomon, and Sydney Colvin. The journal folded in 1873 due to massive debts and a small readership (*The Dark Blue* 1-2).

⁶ Jefferies's *After Earth; Or, Wild England* describes the state of England after a catastrophic disaster wipes out most of the human population, and shows how nature begins to reclaim the London cityscape. The book offers a glimpse of animal life in post-human London: dangerous rats and mice run amok, domesticated animals revert to feral beasts, and many other breeds have perished (18-25). Jefferies also details the last surviving members of the human race: descendants of the "ancients" who attempt to attain semblances of civility, and then the "savages" made up of Bushmen, Romanies, and "foot gypsies" (28-30). The book attempts to explore the anxiety of devolution in post-apocalyptic England, supposing that human civilization faces difficulty when trying to attain its past social structures, and while the narrator hopes to keep to the civility of the past, it seems evident that he fears the dissolution of English culture and society (the first part of the book titled "Relapse into Barbarism").

The novella depicts the issues that surround a small, rural Austrian village that is haunted by the lesbian vampire, Carmilla, who is a descendant of an ancient noble family of Austrian lineage. Narrated by Laura, an aristocratic woman of both English and Austrian ancestry, the novella details Laura's brush with death at the hands of the lesbian vampire Carmilla. Lonely and impressionable, young Laura lives an isolated life in a *schloss* with her father, a man of English ancestry. They encounter a carriage carrying a woman and her daughter that overturns on a boulder, where they learn that the woman is rushing to a family emergency. Her daughter, who is recovering from a supposed illness and in shock from the accident, is left with Laura, much to Laura's delight. But Laura is soon haunted by strange dreams and visits from a large cat, and even visions of Carmilla standing near her bed. The relationship between Carmilla and Laura, which has been heavily analyzed by scholars, is often seen as a mother/daughter relationship as well as a homosexual relationship, and Carmilla has also been seen as a stealthy invader within the English atmosphere of the *schloss*, a reference to fears of reverse invasion and imperialism. At the end of the novella, the characters learn that Carmilla is responsible for Laura's ailing health as well as the deaths of many young village women, and she is exterminated with a stake through the heart, decapitation, and burning. Yet, despite the slaying of Carmilla, Laura laments that she often reminisces of Carmilla, suggesting a lingering fear, or perhaps longing, for the other woman. Thus, Le Fanu's *Carmilla* highlights the possibilities of a frightening entity intruding upon the lives of humans, preying upon young women for her own sustenance.

The novella's complex themes of maternity, sexuality, and nature have inspired various critics, and many scholars have focused on psychoanalysis and Freudian fear of the maternal. Angelica Michelis and Jarlath Killeen focus on the monstrous maternal represented through

Carmilla, highlighting how the female vampire complicates patriarchic separation of the subject from the mother. Carmilla attempts to reassert matriarchic power over Laura to keep her out of the patriarchic system, but Carmilla is killed with the stake—an allusion to masculine penetration of the feminine—and is relegated to the patriarchic system. Similarly, Sally Harris argues that Carmilla threatens to remove Laura from her father's influence, which would remove Laura from patriarchic control.

Michael Davis, on the other hand, argues that Carmilla is “like the chimeras⁷ sold by the hunchback, ‘compounded of parts of monkeys, parrots, squirrels, fish, and hedgehogs, dried and stitched together with great neatness and startling effect’; part of nature and yet beyond conventional meaning. (And is it too fanciful to suggest that ‘Carmilla’ and ‘chimera’ sound quite similar?)” (232). Davis emphasizes the destroyed nature of these animal bodies, torn apart and reattached haphazardly to create new, man-made beast for the amusement of other humans. This image manages to highlight the human domination over nature—destroying the bodies of animals to sell as amusing charms or trinkets and also metaphorically dictates that human experience of nature *is* anthropocentric, as symbolized in the recreating of animal bodies for their own amusement. Joseph Andriano focuses on Carmilla-as-nature, and that the natural progression to death that is physical rather than spiritual, with Carmilla as the maternal bringer of death. He notes the appearance of a strange black face in the carriage, which is quickly forgotten through the rest of the novel. Yet, when Carmilla first awakes after the carriage incident, she asks for both her mother and “Matska,” most likely referring to the mysterious face in the

⁷ The chimera appeared in Greek mythology as a fire-breathing with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. In other accounts, the chimera has the heads of a lion, a goat, and a serpent. The chimera also was used to describe creatures composed of various limbs from different animals (“Chimera” 1-2).

carriage. Andriano points out that “Matska” means “mud,” and is a reference to Carmilla as “the animal and the muddy earth, reminding us of our tie with nature” (54). While Andriano’s argument successfully reevaluates Carmilla from supernatural beast to maternal figure, he ultimately refers to her as “death-goddess,” which consequently positions her as a pagan symbol outside of Christian dogma.

Many of these scholars read Carmilla as the feminine, maternal threat to patriarchy, a mother figure who intends to remove Laura from the restrictions of the patriarchic systems. Carmilla as “mother nature” further underscores Carmilla as the threat of nature encroaching upon the influence of patriarchic civilization. My argument presents a different position for Carmilla: while I agree she is a representation of the maternal monster and patriarchic deviation, I ultimately feel that her being represents a new carnal species that feeds on humans, and her predatory nature de-centers humans from their dominant position over the natural world. Her attacks upon women prompt the human male characters to execute her, and therefore abject⁸ the female vampire threat to their dominance. In this context, Carmilla has a complex relationship with the wedge metaphor: while she can be the feminine Nature who is literally penetrated with the wedge—or stake—to subjugate her to masculine dominance, she also represents another wedge that attempts to dislodge the human wedge. Yet, at the end of the novella, the human men force her to become the female Nature, thrusting their stake, or “wedge,” into her, and relegating her to their governance.

⁸ A theory developed by Julia Kristeva in her work *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Abjection indicates the human reaction to a threat against the distinction between the self and other. The reaction constitutes the forced repression, removal, or denial of the threat, or the “abjection” of that threat. Kristeva argues that “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (4-5). Thus, human culture replicates the institution that enforces the repression of the “primal” in order to maintain distance from the abjected.

The reinforcement of Carmilla's position is man's attempt to keep nature subjected to masculine power, but killing the vampire does not completely eradicate her from existence. Carmilla holds power as a vampire, but also as a female; her power and predatory nature ultimately undercuts the ability for men to dominate the natural world. And while vampires represent a deviation from patriarchic systems of power, forcing humans—usually men—to take action to reinforce dominance with the phallic stake, the female vampire further emphasizes this fissure. Yet, as Darwin's theory attests, the masculine human phallus, or wedge, isn't the only one being driven into Nature; the wedge must compete with other species' wedges. And despite man's apparent ability to control nature and expand civilization through imperialism, the wedge theory attests that the human wedge could still be pushed out by newer, stronger species that could cause extinction of the human race. This also extends to Carmilla as a predator who is forcing out the human wedges as she preys upon the human species. For example, in the novel, Laura describes the non-human strength that Carmilla possesses when the General tries to attack her: "[...] he struck at her with all his force, but she divided under his blow, and unscathed, caught him in her tiny grasp by the wrist. He struggled for a moment to release his arm, but his hand opened, the axe fell to the ground, and the girl was gone" (312). This is also noted near the end of the novella when the Baron explains the traits of the vampire: "One sign of the vampire is the power of the hand. The slender hand of [Carmilla] closed like a vice of steel on the General's wrist when he raised the hatchet to strike. But its power is not confined to its grasp; it leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from" (319). Through this action, Carmilla is shown to be more physically powerful than the male general, but it also creates a visual symbolic of the wedge metaphor: Carmilla shows great strength in her arms—the limbs used to thrust the wedge—and overpowers human arms with her own, a metaphorical

suggestion to “de-wedging” by overpowering the weaker species. Furthermore, she causes permanent damage from her grip, or a numbness that rarely recovers fully. Carmilla shows that she is also capable of causing great loss of human populations as she kills off young women, which would ultimately hinder the ability for humans to propagate. But the male characters of the novella, such as Laura’s father, the General, and Baron Vordenburg, track Carmilla’s coffin and execute her, which symbolically forces her back into patriarchic submission. The execution is extensive, and the male characters go through numerous steps to kill Carmilla:

The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head was next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire. (315-316)

The men do not stop at staking Carmilla, but they continue with dismemberment and burning, which seems excessive. Of course, such an elaborate process highlights how these men want to dominate Carmilla’s body, disfiguring her corpse in such a way that would ensure she would never return. But the ritualistic death also highlights the unease underlying Carmilla’s demise, showing how the men do not stop at the staking. This is related to the fear of de-centering humankind, and they go through lengths to make sure the vampire body is completely destroyed. Yet, no matter how much Carmilla’s body is disfigured, she still exists as a memory. As Cohen suggests, the monster may be slaughtered, it can still exist through fragments such as footprints, bones, shadows, etc., as constant reminders of its existence (6). Angelica Michelis argues, “[Carmilla] still reigns supremely as a constant reminder of the relevance of splitting and the dissolution of separateness as underlying the concept and construction of identity, and here in particular femininity, itself” (20). Thus, despite Carmilla’s symbolic destruction, she still exists

as a reminder; no stake, decapitation, or destructive practice upon her body could possibly erase the fact that Carmilla *existed*. She was alive, feeding on human women, and establishing her own wedge in Nature. In essence, Carmilla embodies the anxiety of patriarchic domination over women and nature; her utter presence in the ecosystem, preying upon the lifeblood of human beings, makes her more than just an evil demon, but another species fighting for survival. In one respect, Carmilla is another wedge that is thrust into Nature's surface and her wedge is hypothetically dislodging the wedges of the human species. Furthermore, Carmilla's need to sustain her life through human blood prompts the possibility of human submission to a more powerful species, one that can dominate and kill the weaker species. And even though the humans manage to kill Carmilla in the novel's conclusion, we are still faced with a new question: are there more vampires in existence? Granted, even though Laura writes that vampires no longer haunt the area, the possibility of more across Europe cannot be eliminated entirely.

In the final chapter of the novel, the Baron describes the nature of the vampire creature and its creation, which is reminiscent of Darwin's theories of common descent and replication of the species:

Assume, at starting, a territory perfectly free from that pest. How does it begin, and how does it multiply itself? I will tell you. A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That specter visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires. This happened in the case of the beautiful Mircalla [an alias for Carmilla], who was haunted by one of those demons. My ancestor, Vordenburg, whose title I still bear, soon discovered this, and in the course of the studies to which he devoted himself, learned a great deal more. (318)

As the Baron suggests, the lasting specter of a suicide is capable of infecting the dead with vampirism: he claims that "it is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law" (318). Ironically this "ghostly law" isn't much different from the laws of nature, and it's significant that vampires follow much of the evolutionary theory

framework in order to sustain themselves as well as propagate the species. For instance, evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr concludes that Darwin's theories tend to focus on themes of common descent and multiplication of species: common descent alludes to the common origin of all beings at one organism, beginning with small, single-cell organisms and evolving into multiple, complex species (36). For the novel, the origin of the vampire can attest to the common descent; all vampires were once human, highlighting that vampires and humans are interrelated and share a common origin. Secondly, in the multiplication of the species, the descendents will multiply into daughter species or "bud" into newer species when in isolation from other breeding lines (37). While this second theory is more focused on the change of a species through multiple avenues, I believe it's significant that Darwin emphasizes the multiplication of the species, or to create more of the species to institute its endurance. This issue is addressed briefly in the novel when the General and Laura's father speak with the woodman at the Karnstein castle ruins. When they ask the woodman why the village near the castle is deserted, the woodman admits that a group of vampires killed many of the inhabitants: "It was troubled by *revenants*,⁹ sir; several were tracked to their graves, there detected by the usual tests, and extinguished in the usual way, by decapitation, by the stake, and by burning; but not until many of the villagers were killed" (307). He continues to describe how the Moravian nobleman detected and slaughtered another vampire, and later uncovered Countess Millarca's (another pseudonym for Carmilla) tomb in order to move it to a new location to save her from turning into a vampire. The woodman also notes that the nobleman was "skilled—as many people are in his country—in such affairs" (307). Thus, the woodman highlights that the case of

⁹ General term for a person who has returned from the dead, but could be in many forms: ghost, vampire, zombie, etc. (Del Lucchese 553).

Carmilla isn't an isolated problem, but a common issue in the region. The Moravian nobleman is described as an experienced vampire slayer, and even further, the tradition of vampire hunting is carried on through his descendant Baron Vordenburg, who assists the men in killing Carmilla. In this case, vampire slaying is a long-standing tradition within the fictional Austrian countryside, one that has passed down through generations, and highlights the fact that there are more vampires prowling through Europe and killing humans. Thus, even though the men stake Carmilla, there could always be more vampires. Furthermore, Darwin's wedge metaphor, which suggests an endless struggle for survival, appears in this endless struggle to conquer the vampires.

Throughout the novel, there are moments where Carmilla interrupts the systems of religious belief with her own perspectives, many in which indirectly echoes to Darwinian theories of survivalism. In one significant instance, Carmilla, Laura, and Laura's father are discussing the deaths to two young peasant women from the village, both of which appeared to be attacked in the same manner. The dialogue in this scene expresses the concerns regarding nature, and it also shows the contradictions in Laura's father's perspective:

"All this," said my father, "is strictly referable to natural causes. These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbors."

"But that very circumstance frightens one horribly," said Carmilla.

"How so?" inquired my father.

"I am so afraid of fancying I see such things; I think it would be as bad as reality."
(269-270)

Laura's father expresses that the deaths, and the hysteria, are all attributed to the "natural" fear allotted to lower classes or the Austrian peoples, and since Laura's father tries to sustain English sophistication in the *schloss*, he institutes English beliefs rather than those of the Austrian villagers. But he also points out how the theory is just as frightening as reality, as the poor

people “infect” one another with these fears. Of course, Carmilla is feigning worry, acting as if she is frightened of an attack. But as he tries to pacify Carmilla’s apparent anxiety, he suggests that God is in charge of their destiny, which Carmilla promptly rebuffs:

"We are in God's hands: nothing can happen without his permission, and all will end well for those who love him. He is our faithful creator; He has made us all, and will take care of us."

"Creator! *Nature!*" said the young lady in answer to my gentle father. "And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature--don't they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so." (270)

In this moment, Carmilla finds the faulty ideology behind the father’s perspective, recognizing his attempt to distinguish between nature and God: nature is how the villagers react and will ultimately be susceptible to the attacks, while God will protect Laura and Carmilla from harm. Suggesting that Laura and Carmilla were safe in “God’s hands” ultimately highlights the inability to accept the course of nature. In essence, Laura’s father attempts to dispel the infectious fear by suggesting that God will protect them. Of course, Carmilla argues against this, pointing out that all things—even heaven—“act and live as Nature ordains.” For Carmilla, there is no separation between God and nature, or perhaps that a God even exists at all; she is arguing that all occurrences are simply part of nature. This is particularly interesting in that Nature is gendered as feminine and God as masculine. Furthermore, this view would fit comfortably within Darwin’s theories, which suggest that we are all animals and not made in God’s image, and therefore are not privileged by a God to be delivered from evil, and are just as susceptible to predatory attacks as other animals and humans.

Carmilla refers to nature again later in the text when she speaks of the hunchback’s charms, and tells Laura that there is no real magic in the charms that keep dark spirits away. She suggests a rather scientific reason, proposing that the charm "has been fumigated or immersed in

some drug, and is an antidote against the malaria” (Le Fanu 281). Of course, Carmilla’s answer to the charm’s power is merely a cover for her own responsibility in the deaths of the young women, but her explanation is similar to her earlier description of nature, and highlights Carmilla’s view of her place within the earthly space:

Certainly; you don't suppose that evil spirits are frightened by bits of ribbon, or the perfumes of a druggist's shop? No, these complaints, wandering in the air, begin by trying the nerves, and so infect the brain, but before they can seize upon you, the antidote repels them. That I am sure is what the charm has done for us. It is nothing magical, it is simply natural. (281)

Carmilla’s scientific explanation certainly coincides with her view of vampirism as natural. By discrediting the influence of magic, she ultimately suggests that nature is the only force at play. Carmilla recognizes the power of nature, and is also enforcing her own place in nature: she is not a supernatural being, but is another species—or another “wedge”—that is challenging the cultural and ecological dominance of patriarchic human society. Of course, this ties into the cultural anxiety of England, whereas religious influence subsides to scientific theory. Furthermore, with religious influence on the decline, humans were questioning their dominance over nature, especially since Christianity granted rights of the earth to men for they were made in God’s image. But this suggests that nature, unlike God, is not benevolent to humans. Rather, humans are vulnerable to nature, and can be victims of diseases, predators, etc. In essence, this issue raised by Carmilla, who represents feminine nature, can also show the struggle between feminine nature and masculine God. Carmilla is threatening the influence of masculine God with her theories of nature, and in turn is challenging perceptions of patriarchic power.

Throughout the text, the narrator suggests that Carmilla is closely tied to the natural world, particularly through animals. Cultural analysts Wayne Bartlett and Flavia Idriceanu’s work *Legends of Blood: The Vampire History and Myth* offers an extensive look at the

relationship between the vampire and nature, and finds that the two hold a common bond through much of the vampire folklore in Europe. They cite that within vampire fiction, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, animals are shown to be incredibly sensitive to the presence of vampires. A similar instance is detailed in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* when the wanderer appears at the *schloss* with his companion, a dog that proceeds to "stop short, suspiciously at the drawbridge, and in a little while began to howl dismally" (Le Fanu 268). While the scene continues with the wanderer, who sells protecting charms to Carmilla and Laura, the dog never stops its disruptive howling, which further emphasizes the theory of animal sensitivity to vampires and supernatural forces. Animals were also considered perilous to the dead, and many European cultures believed that any animal that passed too close to a corpse could possibly possess the body. Thus, many animals were often killed if they ventured too close to dead bodies or cemeteries. Many cultures also believed that the vampire could inhabit animals, and animals such as snakes or even fleas could be feared as vampires (Bartlett 92). As Bartlett and Idriceanu argue in their work, European cultures have often demonized animals, and the anxiety of non-humans was also reflected through Christian doctrine as well as cultural customs:

Fear and awe have been entwined in the way man perceived animals ever since prehistoric times (evidenced, for example, by the prominence of animals in cave paintings that have survived). Elaborate myths grew around the figure of the hunter, and the encounter between man and beast too on epic dimensions in many cultures. The hunter became the hero of the community, and in many religions—and Christianity is no exception—the beast became the embodiment of evil. So at the very beginning of Genesis, we find Satan appearing to Eve as a serpent. And the image of St. George slaying the dragon, a metaphor for victory over the Devil, was a symbolic representation of the triumph of the Church over evil. (93)

This harkens to the use of the wedge, or the triumph of overpowering other species to propagate the human species. Of course, these relationships between human and animal are based upon survival, particularly through hunting and gathering, but dominance over the prey was also

apparent in these relationships, and is still apparent in Victorian ideals of human and nature. Perceptions of animals through European cultures have largely relied religious justifications for animals' subjugation. The fear of human kinship with animals extended into vampire myth and legend, especially since vampires were believed to have animalistic traits and appearances. The vampire is believed to be a produced by legends of half man and half beast creatures, beings that lack moral consciousness. During the times of plague, when massive numbers of bodies would be buried hastily in shallow graves, vampire activity was often believed to be the cause. Carnivorous animals, such as wolves, would frequently dig up hastily buried bodies, and since animals were associated with vampiric activity, the communities would fear the influx of vampires due to animal presences near the corpses (95). These fears seem similar to those that arose in response to Darwin's theory (fear of stability of the human by the invasion of a stronger species) and, as Brantlinger describes in response to colonial guilt (fear of invasion from another culture).

One of the animals closely associated with vampirism, and even shape-shifting vampires, is the cat, which is featured in Le Fanu's novella. Carmilla shape-shifts into a cat, and appears before Laura as the large grey feline: "But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat. It appeared to me about four or five feet long for it measured fully the length of the hearthrug as it passed over it; and it continued to-ing and fro-ing with the lithe, sinister restlessness of a beast in a cage" (278). Le Fanu's adaptation of the vampire, in essence, follows along with the folklore that intertwines the vampire with nature, particularly through animals, and Carmilla's feline alter ego signifies her association with nature and predatory non-humans. The significance of Carmilla-as-cat is its subtle references to Darwin's *Origin*. In

noting the prevalence of species in certain areas, he notes that a species would flourish should predators be in small numbers:

Now the number of mice is largely dependent, as every one knows, on the number of cats; and Col. Newman¹⁰ says, 'near villages and small towns I have found the nests of humble-bees more numerous than elsewhere, which I attribute to the number of cats that destroy the mice.' Hence, it is quite credible that the presence of a feline animal in large numbers in a district might determine, through the intervention, first of mice, and then of bees, the frequency of certain flowers in that district. (101-102)

Ironically, the vampire/human relationship is synonymous with the cat/mouse relationship, and humans are subjected to the needs of the vampire. The monstrous cat, similar to the predatory jungle cats such as tigers and panthers, hint at beings delivered from imperial endeavors and the frightening creatures that lurk in foreign lands (Brantlinger 235). Furthermore, it's significant to note that cats tend to play with mice before killing them, portraying a rather sinister death that lingers within Carmilla's cat-like persona. In this case, humans are merely the mice to vampiric cat, the mere playthings and prey for the stronger beast. The mouse is, of course, so small and weak compared to the cat, and it's significant that this dichotomy should be hinted in the novella. It suggests a great difference in strength between the prey and predator, and in the novella, it takes a group of men to kill one vampire. This hints that the vampire's strength is far more powerful than that of one human, and even though a vampire could be killed, it only can be killed through the cooperation of many humans; just one human may not be able to kill it. Thus, this image portrays the vampire as a strong, predatory, cat-like creature, with humans as the mice, their playthings and their food.

¹⁰ Colonel Henry Wenman Newman, who had an interest in bees. Newman and Darwin exchanged correspondence regarding the life-patterns of bees through horticulture and gardening magazines (Costa 74).

As Carmilla challenges the prospects of human and masculine dominance over nature, she ultimately embodies these fears through her close association to the natural world, and especially through her ability to live in both nature and within the human world. As Cohen notes, the monster is a harbinger of category crisis, a creature that can transgress social, natural, and political boundaries. In essence, monsters become figures of horror because they challenge the boundaries that separate “us” from the “other” (7-8). In the novella, Carmilla is twice called “amphibious,” and Jarlath Killeen notes that the word “amphibious” has resonances with colonial discourse; 18th century writer Samuel Madden described the Irish “like amphibious animals [they] are envied as Englishmen in Ireland and maligned as Irish in England” (107). It is important to note that the term “amphibious” is used in this context to represent one that is capable of living in two worlds, for Carmilla lives as a human to find her prey, but in the vampire world in the coffin below ground. Yet, what’s most significant about this argument is that the term “amphibious” is used to construct a creature that can transgress between different habitats. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, amphibious is “living both on land and in water” and “of, pertaining to, suited for, or connected with both land and water” (1). Carmilla imitates this definition almost literally: when Laura gives the report of Carmilla’s death, she notes that “the leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed” (315). Although the pool of blood is a fixture of vampire folklore, and more than likely added by Le Fanu to accommodate to vampire tradition, the image emphasizes her amphibious qualities; Carmilla’s body is floating in blood (liquid) that serves to sustain her and keep her alive, but she also lives upon dry land within the human world. There is also no true explanation to how Carmilla is capable of leaving her coffin: “How they escape from their graves and return to them for certain hours every day, without displacing the clay or leaving any

trace of disturbance in the state of the coffin or the cerements, has always been admitted to be utterly inexplicable” (317). The confusion regarding her ability to pass between the seemingly impenetrable coffin and the world outside represents the ambiguity surrounding Carmilla through the text, and ultimately leaves the humans horrified by her transgressive abilities. Similarly, Joseph Andriano’s work pointed out that “Matska,” the dark-skinned woman in the carriage, is translated as “mud,” and identifies Carmilla as close to nature, but it also implies that Carmilla is associated with the mixture of both dirt and water, another allusion to her amphibiousness. Regardless, the term’s origin references to ecological themes, and further insinuates a cultural and societal fear of nature through choice rhetoric. This instance alludes to the anthropomorphism apparent in language, which is highlighted in Beer’s *Plots*:

This emphasis upon the natural capacity of the mind to understand appropriately the material world reinforces (as well as assuming) the centrality of man. Its theological basis is given a mythic form in Adam’s naming of the animals. Language is anthropomorphic by its nature and anthropocentric in its assumptions [...] Only by giving up the will to dominate the material world and to relate it to our own needs, conditions, and sensibilities will it be possible for us to find a language that gives proper attention to the nature of things. (50)

Language reflects the “centrality of man” in the universal sense, but also manages to highlight the anthropomorphic and androcentric tendencies at the center of language as well as the de-centering of humans. In this instance, describing Carmilla as “amphibious” certainly manages to convert a dualistic nature of animal survival into one that emphasizes fears of non-conformity and ambiguity. In relation to Cohen’s theory of category crisis, Carmilla’s amphibious being lives between the world of humans and the world of vampires, able to disguise herself along with the humans while also preying upon them. But Carmilla’s amphibiousness is disturbing to the humans in the novella, and they attempt to reassert their dominance by killing her and destroying her body. Even the General voices his discontent with Carmilla’s existence through “his

wonder that heaven should tolerate so monstrous an indulgence of the lusts and malignity of hell” (292). The male characters finally end her amphibious existence with her execution, and in turn relegate her back into their control. Yet, if the vampire species is like any other species, they will create more of their kind. Thus, the humans may never kill off every single vampire, and will continue through an endless struggle to maintain their dominance over nature.

Le Fanu’s novella is influenced by the works of Darwin, emphasizing the anxiety of human and masculine dominance over the natural world, and subjects the characters to a predatory species that is capable of luring and killing humans. Furthermore, Carmilla is frequently described as an entity akin to animals: unusually strong, amphibious, and feline. She can live as a human and infiltrate the domestic English sphere that Laura and her father live within while she secretly preys upon young village women. Thus, Carmilla encompasses Darwin’s evolutionary theories by competing for survival and attempting to propagate the vampire species by luring Laura with her love and affection, perhaps an effort to transform Laura into another vampire. She also demonstrates her own self-awareness as a species in nature by denouncing English thoughts on religion, the supernatural, and the natural, instead drawing attention to her position as a member of nature rather than the evil supernatural. Thus, the novel emphasizes that vampires are not simply supernatural evil beings, but are possibly another species that has evolved into a more powerful specimen. Carmilla is not simply the embodiment of evil, or a goddess of death, but another species, similar to humans but much more powerful and predatory, that is “staking” her claim in the ecosystem. Even though the humans kill Carmilla, there seems to be no feeling of triumph; rather, Laura often thinks of Carmilla, even years after her death. In the aftermath of Carmilla’s death, Laura shows that there is still lingering fear: the fact that Carmilla existed, as well as the possibility of more vampires in

existence. In the end, there is no real triumph; it's simply another struggle in the economy of life against another species' wedge. Thus, *Carmilla* reflects the anxieties prevalent in Victorian England regarding the struggle to remain the dominant species, in particular due to Darwin's wedge theory, and highlights the violence of the struggle—the wedging or staking—that enforces dominance and causes extinction of the weaker species. As long as vampires continue to be produced, there will be an endless struggle to overpower a more powerful species.

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