

Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla": A Different Vampire Story

Sheridan Le Fanu'nun "Carmilla" eseri: Farklı bir Vampir Hikayesi

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Abstract: The story "Carmilla" was written by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872. It is within a collection of stories published under the title, "In a Glass Darkly". Carmilla is the only vampire story in this book and it has been accepted as one of the most important works of vampire fiction. Le Fanu's story paved the road for Dracula and other vampire stories. It is assumed that he was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816). This story is about a relationship between a young woman, Laura who lives in a remote castle in Austria and a stranger, Carmilla who comes to stay for three months. Later we learn that Carmilla is a vampire and all the girls in the surrounding area and Laura become ill because of her visits at night. Le Fanu creates a vampire story by combining traditional gothic elements and Irish folklore. With this, he aims at questioning Victorian sexual politics. This paper will analyse the story's traditional gothic and folklore elements and how Le Fanu subverts Victorian sexual politics through a vampire story.

Keywords: Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, Irish folklore, victorian sexual politics

Özet: *Carmilla*, İrlandalı yazar Sheridan Le Fanu'nun 1872 de yazdığı uzun hikayesidir. "In a Glass Darkly" isimli bir hikaye koleksiyonu içinde yer alır. Bu kitaptaki tek vampir hikayesidir ve vampir yazınının en önemli eserleri arasında kabul edilir. Bu hikaye, Drakula ve diğer vampirlerin oluşmasında yolu açmıştır. Bu eseri yazarken, Le Fanu'nun Samuel Taylor Coleridge'in "Christabel" isimli şiirinden etkilendiği söylenmektedir. Bu hikaye, Avusturya'da ıssız bir şatoda yaşayan Laura ile bir araba kazasıyla üç aylığına onların evinde kalmak durumunda olan Carmilla'nın garip ilişkisini anlatır. Daha sonra, Carmilla'nın bir vampir olduğunu ve çevrede yaşayan tüm genç kızları Laura da dahil olmak üzere hasta ettiği görülür. Le Fanu geleneksel gotik özellikleri ile İrlanda folklorunun bazı özelliklerini birleştirerek bir vampir hikayesi yazar. Bununla da esasında, Victoria Dönemi İngilteresi'nin cinsiyet politikalarını eleştirmek amaçındadır. Bu makalede, hikayenin klasik gotik öğeleri ve folklorik temaları incelenek ve Le Fanu'nun Victoria Dönemi cinsiyet politikalarını nasıl altüst etmeye çalıştığı incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, İrlanda folkloru, victoria dönemi cinsiyet politikaları

The story "Carmilla" was written by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872. It was published within a collection of stories published under the title, "In a Glass Darkly". "Carmilla" is the only vampire story in this book and it has been accepted as one of the most important works of vampire fiction. It is assumed that Le Fanu was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816). Le Fanu's antagonist Carmilla has certain similiarities with Christabel's Geraldine.

The heroines of the two works are similar, both Laura and Christabel are the children of deceased mothers and are currently in charge of their widowed fathers. Geraldine's presence gives Christabel similar symptoms as Carmilla does to Laura. Both heroines experience troubled

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sleep and weakness in the morning after spending the night with their guest. Le Fanu's story "*Carmilla*" is about a lesbian relationship between a young woman, Laura, who lives in a remote castle in Austria, and a stranger, Carmilla, who comes to stay for three months. With this story, Le Fanu tries to question the sexual politics of the Victorian period. How does he subvert Victorian sexual politics through a vampire story will be the main focus of this study.

"*Carmilla*" is narrated by the victim, Laura, a beautiful and lonely 19 year old girl. She tells the story 10 years later, when she is 29. In the beginning of the story, we see that Laura remembering an incident when she was about six years old. One night, she finds herself alone in her bedroom; nursery maid and nurse were absent. Laura trembles and fears. Suddenly, she sees a young woman kneeling beside her with her hands beneath the covers. The woman embraces her and and lays down beside her on the bed. Then, Laura falls asleep. When she wakes up suddenly, she felt a sensation like two needles stabbing deep into her breast. She cries out. The young woman disappears. The nursery maid later assures Laura that it was she who bent over her, and the rest was a bad dream. Soon a priest comes to pray with Laura to soothe her. This incident's influence upon Laura will be seen later in the story.

The story jumps to when Laura is 19 years old. She lives with her father and servants; her mother had died when she was an infant. They live a quiet life in their remote castle. For a young girl like Laura, it is an isolated existence. She has no companionship except for her governess and the rare visits of neighbours. With the coming of their mysterious guest, Carmilla, Laura's lonely life changes. One day she was walking with her father, they witness a coach accident that injures a girl. The girl's mother is worried and she must not delay her journey while her daughter recovers, and she asks the directions to the nearest village. She informs the father that during her visit the girl will not speak about her family. Carmilla is given a room in the castle. Laura visits her in her room and is surprised to see the woman in her dream of ten years before. Carmilla, too recognizes her. She says she had a strange dream in which she found herself in a strange nursery.

Laura is charmed by Carmilla despite her weird habits. She sleeps until late in the day, refusing to eat food. Carmilla sometimes only drinks hot chocolate or wine, has an hatred to religious objects, and so on. She seems to tire easily and to be fragile, but then unexpectedly returns in a blush of health and energy. Laura's initial fear of her pretty visitor is overcome by a physical attraction. Laura cannot resist her energy. Carmilla visits Laura every night and kisses her with professions of love until she falls asleep. As Carmilla bids goodnight upon their first meeting, she displays an unusual attachment to Laura that gives clues about what is going to happen. Laura describes the encounter by saying, "*she held me close in her pretty arms for a moment and whispered in my ear, "Good night, darling, it is very hard to part with you, but good-night; to-morrow, but not early, I shall see you again"*" (Le Fanu, 1872, 24).

Meanwhile, young girls in the surrounding area are dying of a mysterious illness. People describe this illness as being like malaria. After Carmilla's visits, Laura has strange dreams in which she was kissed by warm lips and then she had feelings of strangulation. Laura herself becomes ill. Laura then has a dream in which her dead mother gives her a clear warning that her life is in danger:

One night, instead of the voice I was accustomed to hear in the dark, I heard one, sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible, which said, "*Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin*". At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her white night dress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood (Le Fanu, 1872, 47).

Her father calls a doctor in order to examine Laura. The doctor tells him not to leave her alone. Then, he moves off with Laura in a carriage for the ruined village of Karnstein. They

political voice, and for suffrage. All these were contrary to the traditional place women occupied in civilized society. The death of Le Fanu's wife also deeply influenced him during the writing process with all these changes in women's status. Judith Halberstam's debate that "... Gothic is also a narrative technique, a generic spin that transforms the lovely and the beautiful into the abhorrent and then frames this transformation within a humanist moral fable" (1995, 22) speaks directly to Le Fanu's creation. In "*Carmilla*", there is a lovely and beautiful woman, the stereotypical woman, such as Le Fanu expected from his wife, and in many respects, did not receive. Carmilla, like Susanna, was not what the surface presented. In the case of his wife, we have by all accounts a psychologically troubled woman whose psychosis resulted in her early death. For Carmilla, beneath the beautiful exterior there was trouble waiting for the precise moment to lay waste that which was familiar and comfortable. From the outset, Carmilla becomes precisely the creature Halberstam suggests (1995, 22). As Laura describes upon her first visit with Carmilla:

Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, "drawn towards her", but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so descriptably engaging (Le Fanu, 1872, 23).

Sheri Wohl explores the fact that through Laura's eyes comes the hint at the monster behind the lovely facade (2006, 15). Through Laura also comes the traditional woman that is beginning to be replaced by women reaching for independence and identity. She embodies those characteristics that history has seen fit to infuse into the perfect woman. She is gentle and pretty, well bred and obedient, a direct contrast to the evil vampire Carmilla who hides behind the face of beauty, and who seeks to spread her evil through sexual allure and seduction. Nina Auerbach writes of the female vampire, "*her vampirism... is an interchange, a sharing, an identification, that breaks down the boundaries of familial roles and the sanctioned hierarchy of marriage*" (1995, 47) as opposed to the prim and proper Laura. In Carmilla, he seems to speak directly to women's changing roles in society by pointing out the unreliability of history as well as tradition. The status quo was being threatened and it was a threat that came from within. Carmilla herself is a dichotomy, both beauty and monster, posing the question: is the threat to status quo good or bad? (Wohl, 2006, 15).

At the same time, there is a sense of guilt threading its way through the narrative. The traditional woman defined by Laura is weak and ineffectual. She is torn between the knowledge of her proper place and the warmth and desire she feels for this sensual woman who touches her softly. It seems wrong and yet feels so good. Carmilla herself is the seductress who is the cause of the conflict mirroring the controversy within society and within Le Fanu himself. Count Dracula is a monster that wears a monster's face. Carmilla is a monster who wears a woman's face and that is what sets apart or as Auerbach describes this as "... *his vampire invokes rather the horror inherent in the Victorian dream of domestic coziness, the restoration of lost intimacy and comfort*" (1995, 44).

In a review of Carmilla's stage production, Katy Walsh (2011) defines lesbian vampires as "*Victorian Era feminists*". Then she asks "*what was the better condition for a women living in that era?*". They were going to become victims in loveless marriages and male dominated culture or being forever young and taking what they want as a vampire. This is really what Sheridan Le Fanu wants to do. He wants the reader to question the sexual politics of the Victorian period. He does not like the traditional belief that women should stay at home and only do housework. Laura is the typical representative of this kind of women. He creates another character that is opposite of Laura. But there is only one problem. The alternative to this

kind of traditional woman is a vampire who is all powerful. This also makes this story very interesting. He also skillfully uses Irish folklore with traditional gothic elements and creates a really interesting and unusual vampire story. *Carmilla* should have been read by true fans of fiction, not just because it is a good read, but because of how it has influenced so many other stories in this genre, most notably Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

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