

“THE PULL OF DARK DEPTHS”: FEMALE MONSTERS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
GOTHIC LITERATURE

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

“THE PULL OF DARK DEPTHS”: FEMALE MONSTERS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
GOTHIC LITERATURE. (August 2011)

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The Gothic literature from the late 1700s to the late 1800s featured a multitude of female characters with monstrous qualities, specifically their transformative and transgressive bodies. Mermaids, vampires, shape-shifters, sexual deviants, and madwomen fill the pages of these works with emotion and movement, harming their victims while seducing them. In an era when conflicting and paradoxical ideas about women flourished in the bourgeois culture, many of these female monsters in the literature of the era often embody these paradoxes, revealing the anxieties of the culture and its perception of women who do not achieve the status of the proper woman. Examination of the female monsters in Anne Bannerman’s “The Mermaid,” Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* leads to a discourse on the transgressive female body, including discussions of sexuality, disease, the undead body, and boundary crossing. By analyzing the women through the lens of the nineteenth-century concepts of the female body and mind, it becomes clear that the monstrous female in literature crosses multiple social and physical boundaries, challenging norms and confirming sexist stereotypes and further confusing the paradoxes of the proper and improper body.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstractiv

Acknowledgmentsv

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Female Monster1

Chapter 2: The Violent Mermaid: Meeting of Natural and Supernatural in the Body10

Chapter 3: Polluted Women: Vampiric Transformations of Carmilla and Lucy Westenra.....20

Chapter 4: Lifting the Veil: Degeneration and Helen Vaughan50

Chapter 5: Lasting Impressions: Female Monsters as Figures of Resilience69

Works Cited76

Vita81

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Female Monster

“Oh race of men! Beware the honied poisons, the sweet songs and the pull of dark depths. Do not let the charm of contrived appearances seduce you; be in dread of the destructive flames and the fierce serpent.”

Marbod of Rennes (c. 1035-1123)

Interest in the bodies of female monsters in Gothic literature has sparked a multitude of interpretations across centuries that reflect on the cultures that created these monstrous women. Barbara Creed writes, “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (qtd. in Becker 55). The monster woman, as she is defined in this thesis, is a supernatural female figure who transforms her body at some point in her existence, either from normal woman to monstrous woman; her transformative and transgressive body positions her as a boundary crosser. Many critics have defined female monsters in other ways, yet I seek to examine the female monster as she often appears in Gothic literature of the nineteenth century. She crosses the boundaries of masculine/feminine, dead/undead, attraction/repulsion, and reality/imagination, etc. The female monster’s body is transformative and transgressive, moving outside of the social, ideological concepts of what a female body and feminine behavior should be according to the nineteenth-century mainstream British culture. Because she does not comply with cultural constructs of female nature and usually possesses supernatural characteristics (not necessarily powers, but just aspects of the body that extend beyond a normative concept of nature) she is a figure that inspires fear and anxiety within the other characters. Her violence and sexuality (or other characters’ perceptions of her violence and sexuality) subvert the patriarchal society in which she operates. Because she is a product

of her time and embodies fear and anxiety, a look into the culture that created her and the many changes she undergoes through a century of British literature will further illuminate the study of women in Gothic literature.

The female monster who appears to be a normative female (partially at least) and behaves like normal women when she is out in society presents a significant problem to the community. The body of the female monster inspires within the other characters the feeling of abjection. In her essay on abjection, Julia Kristeva writes, "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1). The abject, according to Kristeva, is what we reject, the Other, and what repulses us. It is "radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). The female monster brings the other characters beyond the "normal" and the "real" into a space where everything is chaotic. Because she poses a threat to order, the respondents react with repulsion, even though they may have felt attraction before recognizing the abject often then seeking to separate themselves from the object of these contradictory feelings through destruction. "And yet," Kristeva continues, "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). This challenge corresponds to a specific goal that the female monster must accomplish because of her body's physical demands and/ or desires to accomplish. This body, the characters (correctly) observe, is against their own interests and safety; the female monster body reflects to them what they fear the most.

In his essay "Monster Culture: Seven Theses," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out seven characteristics of monsters that are widely shared by all. His theories of how to "read" the

monster have helped me form my own thesis. He proposes “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (3). Several of his theses apply directly to the examination of the monster body, my main interest. He writes, “The monster’s body is a cultural body” (Cohen 4). This means that the monster is not separated from the culture, as the characters in the works might assert, but the monster’s body represents culture itself. The two cannot be separated. Another thesis explains, “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (Cohen 5). He also mentions boundaries, although not specifically bodily borders or transformations: “The monster is the harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 6) and “The monster polices the borders of the possible” (Cohen 13). These theses apply to all monsters, but I wish to consider the female monster specifically as the physical embodiment of cultural preoccupations and concerns of the nineteenth century British mainstream. Women in the nineteenth century were already marginalized and faced tight social restrictions, and women who did not accept the rules and meet expectations were made into “monsters” by society. While every culture has successfully implemented some form of the female monster into their consciousness, the transformative females who appear in the Gothic literature of the British Isles cross boundaries and bring forward conflicting and contradicting cultural ideologies. The female monster perhaps arose from these ongoing and passionate debates of the true nature of women and the ideologies that controlled their lives.

Battles and debates raged on between mainstream attitudes and assertions about female nature and the female body and more undercurrent views that called for female independence, equality, and education. There was a push for education and social measures that could be taken to allow women to contribute to society during the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, sparking a debate about the existence of boundaries for women. The earlier decades of the nineteenth century featured an expectation of women to be proper, to behave according to cultural expectations of femininity: submissiveness, pleasantness, dedicated, modesty, humility, etc. However, during this time, post-French Revolutionary thought often led to a desire for women to contribute to society and have a share in the newfound feelings and workings towards democratic social change. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the idealization of the Angel of the House as described by Coventry Patmore's poem built an impossible pedestal for the Victorian woman to climb, as an even greater leap beyond the expectations of a proper woman. The resistance against these idealized expectations capitalized on the fact that ideologies are not as easily conceived in practice, allowing for the rise of the New Woman, who sought to contribute to society and achieve personal goals. Deviations from the middle class expectations of women to be humble, pretty, supportive, and quiet were seen as problematic. Much of the expectations of women's behavior were based out of thoughts about women's bodies. In Gothic literature, the deviant woman becomes the exaggerated monstrous woman who often plays the role of the mirror, parody, or double of the angelic feminine figure, the improper versus the proper. In her book *The Improper Feminine*, Pykett discusses femininity in the late nineteenth century and writes, "The debates on the Woman question (or the Woman Problem) were instigated and orchestrated by the demands made by, or on behalf of, women for the widening of their sphere" (12). In a middle class culture enraptured with science, religion, and social change, concepts of human nature were frequently conflicted. The possibility also existed of using the ideas of one to support the ideas of the other. Instead of a pre-eighteenth century view of women's bodies as failed bodies, or inferior versions of men, women were

idealized and certain characteristics of a female “nature” were created. While these characteristics of the proper British woman seemed much more complimentary than older ideas, the essentialist view of the nature of women was restricting and created sharp binaries and boundaries. Mary Poovey addresses the problems that stemmed from this peculiar change in ideology:

The late seventeenth-century ‘Mother of our Miseries’ and the mid-nineteenth-century ‘hope of the age’ are not really so far apart as they might initially seem. The latter can even be seen as the triumphant sublimation of the sexual anxiety that generated the former, with Woman in each case the object—as passive and as secondary as that term suggests—of the desiring, dreading subject, Man. Both stereotypes, in fact, rigidly confined real women to prescribed roles; as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a widow, as a virgin or a whore, every woman was defined by relationship—explicitly to a man, implicitly to sexuality itself (x).

Perhaps this change stemmed from the rising middle class and social changes that allowed pliability for the formation of boundaries for women and new ideas about female nature. A woman who did not perform her “natural” gender role as passive and non-threatening (non-sexual) was unfeminine and unnatural. Pykett goes on to write, “This ‘natural’ state of affairs was also continually in the process of construction and reproduction in legal, medical, and scientific discourses, as well as in the discourse of the new social science and anthropology” (15). Even as the age began to progress in many ways thanks to advancements by explorers and researchers, many of the new progressions continued to support the patriarchal society’s goals and ideas of female nature instead of releasing women from these structures. The mainstream society desired to continue using a traditional mode that they deemed successful and they credited with making their society successful. Although women were often thought of as asexual entities because of their moral substance, Poovey writes, it was recognized they still had a “‘female’ sexuality that was automatically assumed to be the defining

characteristic of female nature” (19). This illustrates just one of the peculiar restricting and contradictory assumptions about women that were prevalent within society.

These multiple binaries and dichotomies allowed room for the Gothic to establish archetypal figures that would reflect the ideologies of the patriarchal society and the threat that the Other posed to a culture that quickly rejected difference and expected no boundary crossing. The female monster is often the only woman in a text that is not connected to a man, not controlled by anyone but her own urges and destiny. They are not rigidly confined, and their bodies and behavior resist this confinement into prescribed roles. The female monsters resist confinement and definition, marking their existences as part of the Gothic literary experience. Peter K. Garrett writes, “This nightmare of a world where all transcendental support or guarantees of the intrinsic have disappeared may be the deepest terror of the nineteenth century Gothic, but it is also confronted by persistent reminders of dialogical possibilities that resist such reduction” (27). Therefore, the world in which the female monster exists is Gothic and provides an opportunity to explore this terror. The Gothic, according to Jerrold E. Hogle is a “highly unstable genre,” allowing for the concept of Gothic literature to develop outside of the earlier Gothic genre as a reflection of the terror of domesticity although that kind of Gothic still continued in popularity (1). In the monster Gothic, the monsters break into the safe areas of comfortable ways of thinking for the nineteenth century and provoke them with contradictions, paradoxes, and mirrors. Terror is mixed with horror in the monster Gothic.

Gothic literature of the nineteenth century often provides a contrast between the proper lady and the angel and her counterpart, the female monster; both act as exaggerated examples of their prototypes. The monstrous female body crosses the boundaries that jut between the

proper and improper and blurs them, complicating the belief and evidence of a female nature. Many female monsters also have a quality that allows them to function more efficiently to achieve these urges or goals: they look very often and/or behave often like “normal” women. Only when their monstrosity is revealed through discovery of their sinister actions do they become threatening figures to the other characters.

My goal in this thesis is to demonstrate how some female monsters in their transformative and transgressive bodies cross a multitude of boundaries and reveal changes in cultural ideas and anxieties about women. The monsters’ sexually aberrant, violent, and destructive bodies challenge society. Bram Dijkstra writes, “For them [Victorians] feminine self-assertion represented a reversion to earlier conditions of human life, a return to a more primitive stage of human civilization” (65). This regression to a past period of “uncultured” existence is what the female monster can represent within the text, and yet she reveals the progression and change of social fears and anxieties, making her both outside the culture and inside the culture. She is the exaggerated and distorted self-assertive female that the ideologies battled against. The female monster lurks in a dark shadow of ambiguity and the unknown.

Studying female monsters in literary works of this time period is a daunting task, one at which many writers and scholars have been successful, producing a colorful array of interesting work. I am limited in my selections because of the hefty nature of the task, which would be a life’s work. I attempt to place the following works into cultural contexts that will demonstrate the many ways their boundary crossing challenges cultural conceptions of femininity and how the female monster changes throughout several decades. I will examine female monstrosity in the works “The Mermaid” by Anne Bannerman (1800), *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1872), *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897), and *The Great God Pan*

by Arthur Machen (1894). The large time gap between the publishing of “The Mermaid” and *Carmilla* is problematic and yet many texts about transformative female monsters within the gap such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Christabel* and John Keats’s “Lamia” have been examined closely by previous scholars and most of the assertions I could make about the poems would be redundant.

Anne Bannerman may not be a canonical poet, but she contributed to the revival of the Scottish ballad and Gothic literature. She produced several poems that featured the ambiguous and mysterious bodies of supernatural women and often invoked the terrifying forces of the sublime. “The Mermaid” features a female monster who appears in the old myths and legends of the area and a frequent figure in literature from around the globe, but Bannerman’s mermaid is unique. Bannerman creates an alliance between a monstrous, supernatural female figure with the destructive capabilities and actions of nature in order to achieve the goal of luring sailors to their deaths. Her body blurs the boundaries of natural and supernatural, woman and animal, and nature and human.

Another classic female monster is the vampire, just as visible and recognizable today as she was in the nineteenth century. Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Stoker’s *Dracula* feature female vampires whose bodies have transformed because of the disease of vampirism. Their bodies break the normative life cycle by becoming the frightening Undead, capable of passing their disease onto others. Several decades pass between the publishing of these two works, and the changes in culture are reflected in the differences between the two different vampiric women featured in these two works, *Carmilla* and Lucy Westenra. I attempt to further demonstrate how the vampiric body enters into monstrosity through disease and then transformation and

how the vampire woman's body transgresses cultural norms of sexuality and proper femininity.

Helen Vaughan from Machen's *The Great God Pan* is another monstrous woman who brings destruction to the patriarchal structure through the strangeness of her body and the convincing aspects of her performance of femininity. As a figure that is both female and supernatural, her body is one of the strangest and most complex in literature, and her transformative death is as horrifying as it is fascinating. Helen's body encompasses all aspects of nature within her, making her an extreme example of degeneration, a preoccupation of the Victorians. The changing views of women, the heyday of the New Woman and anxiety stemming from famous violent criminals including Jack the Ripper and England's first female serial killer: these all contribute to the discussion of Helen and her horrors. This strange novella lacks the critical attention and examination it deserves, and I hope to contribute further to the interest in and discussion of this odd, yet intriguing text.

Susanne Becker provides further input on the female monster:

First, it is here encountered by a female subject—a subject that is, as we have seen, split, 'in process,' and in different ways challenging to the patriarchal ideology. Second, the 'monsters' of the feminine gothic are among the most powerful female figures of literary history, representing forces which are among the most challenging to the structures both of the house of fiction and the symbolic order (57).

This statement accurately describes the importance of looking closer at these female monsters in literature. What they present to readers is not just the theme of the bad woman versus the good woman or the seductress of the male protagonist. The female monster in Gothic literature challenges social and physical perceptions and expectations of women and crosses multiple boundaries as she transforms and transgresses.

Chapter 2

The Violent Mermaid: Meeting of Natural and Supernatural in the Body

Anne Bannerman's poem "The Mermaid" is part of her collection of poems that feature transformative and transgressive female characters. The mermaid is a mythological figure that was popular throughout the nineteenth century, and with a woman's head and torso and her lower half a fish tail, the mermaid was a hybrid (Dijkstra 258). In traditional folklore, the mermaid used her womanly beauty and beautiful voice to lead ships into coastal rocks or to lure unsuspecting sailors to the side of their boats, allowing the mermaid opportunity to pull them into the water and drown them. Bannerman uses this folkloric inspiration and infuses it with the Gothic element of the mysterious and dangerous femme fatale and the sublimity of nature. In fact, Bannerman combines both nature and the supernatural hybrid body of the mermaid and her involvement with nature to destroy men, and creates a female voice attempting to obliterate patriarchal systems and express her own experience as a transformative female. Bannerman's poem "The Mermaid" features a woman-animal hybrid, a figure of the natural/supernatural that reveals anxiety about the female body and its relation to destruction and the usurpation of masculine powers.

Bannerman was a Scottish poet who was part of the ballad revival movement; her work is characterized by an obscure style that frustrated many of her critics and readers (Craciun 205). Ashley Miller writes, "When Bannerman was writing at the turn of the century, Edinburgh was a prominent site of a number of literary movements, including the ballad revival, the Gothic, and Romanticism; Bannerman's poetry exists at an often unsettling intersection of these genres" (para. 2). Her work frequently invokes folkloric characters, legends, the supernatural, veiled (literally or figuratively) women, and the sublime,

illustrating this “intersection” Miller writes about. “The Mermaid” also lies in this intersection, highlighting the speaker’s identity as a boundary crosser. According to Craciun’s essay “Romantic Spinstrelsy: Anne Bannerman and the Sexual Politics of the Ballad,” Bannerman received high praise for her first poetry volume *Poems (1800)* and numerous vitriolic reviews for her second poetry volume, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry (1802)*. She never succeeded as a professional poet despite enthusiastic support from some other Scottish writers and publishers. Eventually, she gave up her writing career and became a governess, defeated. In fact, little is known about Bannerman outside of her published works and letters written by various contemporaries, and her work is not often anthologized or used in criticism. Her characters and the poems themselves are draped in obscurity, and Miller writes, “Poetry is deliberately affective, Bannerman suggests—but it may affect in ways that frustrate rather than resolve” (para. 1). Furthermore, Craciun comments:

Relying on labyrinthine narrative structures and enigmatic veiled figures, Bannerman’s poems resisted the attempts of readers and critics to unveil their meaning. In thus resisting a will to truth, a desire for absolute truth and vision, Bannerman’s veiled femmes fatales resisted the emergent Romantic poetics of the ideal as unveiled truth, and of the ideal woman (159).

This resistance against idealism and truth in Bannerman’s poetry perhaps reflects upon her personal struggles as a female writer, but she also uses the obscurity of her poetry and her characters to enhance the struggles of her own female characters, especially the mermaid, who narrates her own story. Instead of using an archetypal figure and following a predictable storyline for such a figure, Bannerman resists convention and invokes ambiguity. Andrew Elfenbein writes, “Unlike the women poets who followed her, Bannerman had little interest in cultivating a respectable image as a conservative poetess. Instead, she, like Mary

Wollstonecraft, used the category of genius to justify pushing the boundaries of sex/gender representation” (129). Indeed, Bannerman’s unique and powerful portrayal of the mermaid as a boundary crosser does reflect on her own position as a female writer.

This position should not be ignored as the early nineteenth century British culture was influenced by a post-French Revolution rhetoric that combined a contradictory excitement for the potential of social change and an apprehension of potential disruptions to order. In her book *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne K. Mellor states that the French Revolution and the Enlightenment “opened up a discourse of equality in which women could participate” (31). Thus, much of the work written by women during this time contributed to a discussion of female rational abilities, emphasized the need for education of women, shared a desire to contribute to society, and featured a communion with nature rather than a need to conquer it (Mellor 2-3, 6, 11). In the Gothic works written by female authors, Mellor observes a frequent discussion of the natural world and the sublime. Most of Mellor’s focus is on the Romantic writers, but she does discuss and include some female Gothic writers (not Bannerman, however). Mellor argues that there are two distinct groups of the feminine experience of the sublime in female-authored literature: one group “accepts the identification of the sublime with the experience of masculine empowerment, but they explicitly equate this masculine sublime with patriarchal tyranny” (Mellor 91). The other group seeks communion with nature, particularly in Scottish and Irish works, seeing the female experience as part of the natural world. In such works, the sublime does not cause anxiety, but an “ecstatic experience of co-participation in a nature they explicitly engender as female” (Mellor 97). Bannerman, as a Gothic writer and a Scottish woman, does not rest comfortably in either group. Bannerman’s depiction of a woman and the terrifying aspect of the sublime cross

these boundaries of predictable female experiences as well because her mermaid is a feminized destroyer, contradicting the concept of the terrifying side of the sublime as masculine and giving her own body the physical power to inflict terror. The mermaid works in communion with nature, not for peace, but destruction. Thus, the mermaid crosses the boundaries of cultural and literary expectations of what is feminine and masculine even during a time when there was a push for change and a burst of female literary activity. I do not wish to suggest that the mermaid speaks for Bannerman, but instead argue that the mermaid has a voice that reveals anxieties of the culture and interprets her personal experience.

As discussed earlier, the mermaid's body crosses boundaries of normal physical development. Mermaids are hybrids, common in folklore. Both the female body and fish body are natural physical forms, but the hybridity of the two creates a supernatural creature, one who is beyond nature. Nina Auerbach writes, "Her hybrid nature, her ambiguous status as creature, typify the mysterious, broadly and evocatively demonic powers of womanhood in general" (*Woman* 94). In a description that harkens to mermaids, Bram Dijkstra describes the siren: "She had allowed the masculine force of the bisexual primal state to resurface; hence she personified the regressive, bestial element in woman's nature. She was not the cultured pearl of modern, passive femininity but the dangerous, brutal, atavistic child of the sea's cold watery womb" (258). The mermaid is, then, a physical embodiment of fears of the bestial potential of women's bodies and the natural danger within the body. The mermaid in the poem, as in folklore, also has the supernatural ability to lure sailors to their deaths by alluring them with their singing voices. This makes the mermaid's body supernatural, yet still part of nature, a complicated boundary-crossing step for an individual body. Further

complicating the boundary crossing, the mermaid in the poem discusses her connection with the nature around her and the ways they interact together to bring destruction, thus making her body an extension of natural forces. This results in a combination of supernatural and natural forces. Because of the violence of the natural forces that the mermaid describes, this poem can be associated with the concept of the sublime, a Gothic characteristic that frequently combines awe and terror.

The mermaid, as the speaker of the ballad, participates in communion with nature. She attaches herself not to the idealized feminine natural elements, but to the destructive elements typically associated with masculinity. The violence of nature is frequently mentioned by the mermaid. She establishes herself as part of nature, but not yet equal to it, commenting: “My solitary watch I keep, / And listen, while the turbid deep / Groans to the raging tempests, as they roll / Their desolating force, to thunder at the pole” (I. 7-10). The mermaid places herself in violent coastal waters in a northern sea. The use of words like “turbid,” “deep,” “raging,” “desolating,” and “thunder” already begin to describe her experience of nature. This atmosphere adds to the Gothic mood of the poem and allows her to properly situate herself towards her aim. Her goal, she says is:

To lure the sailor to his doom;
Soft from some pile of frozen snow
I pour the syren-song of woe;
Like the sad mariner’s expiring cry,
As, faint and worn with toil, he lays him down to die (III. 26-30).

This section reveals that she uses her singing voice to attract the attention of sailors (“lure”) in ships passing along the rough coastline, perhaps driving them to madness and despair and then to wreck their ship. The “syren-song of woe” is an interesting notation. She compares

herself to the mythical siren, never calling herself a mermaid, and adds that the song is woeful. The sad song prods the sailors' own loneliness and exhaustion. It might also be a commentary of her emotional state.

The use of her voice both in luring men to their doom and as the narrator of the poem about her own transformative and transgressive experience brings a different perspective to the female monster than is typically depicted. Usually in most works when a monstrous female appears (and in the other works discussed in this thesis), the female monster is not given knowing subjectivity while in her monstrous form. We only hear her story through the subjectivity of other characters or through the voices of other characters. In "The Mermaid," the character is using this vocal power to destroy masculine enterprises and also to provide a context (although obscured) of a non-normative female existence.

While the mermaid indeed spends most of her narrative effort describing the violence she participates in, she also mentions her own experience, which allows her to reveal aspects of her transformative experience and her "solitary" existence as a boundary crosser. These comments are fragmented and obscure as to the exact details of the events surrounding her transformation, as is Bannerman's style. However mysterious, it is necessary to look into the fragments to establish the changes her body has made and how the physical transformation perhaps contributes to her boundary-crossing behavior, perhaps inspiring the question: does the transformative body take the foreground or does the transgressive behavior?

Early in the poem, the mermaid says, "Eternal world of waters, hail! / Within thy caves my lover lies; / And day and alike shall sail; / Ere slumber lock my streaming eyes" (II. 11-14). She makes this statement in a call to the "eternal world of waters," noting the sea's physical presence and permanence. By referencing a lover in the caves of the seas, she is

suggesting that her lover was killed at sea and is now taken from her. “Ere slumber lock my streaming eyes” reveals a determination to remain vigilant even in the throes of nature’s violence, one of the few times she notes a struggle against nature. Craciun writes, “. . . Bannerman again revises the male-authored femme fatale, not into a sympathetic character, the abandoned woman who laments her fate, but into a more spectacular destroyer whose chief weapon is her song” (177). However, from her narration, she does give hints about how her body was transformed from a “normal” woman to a mermaid body. She says:

When Vengeance bears along the wave
 The spell, which heaven and earth appals;
 Alone, by night, in a darksome cave,
 On me the gifted wizard calls.
 Above, the ocean’s boiling flood
 Thro’ vapour glares the moon, in blood:
 Low sounds along the waters die,
 And shrieks of anguish fill the sky;
 Convulsive powers the solid rocks divide,
 While, o’er the heaving surge, th’ embodied Spirits glide (IV. 40-50).

This passage is full of descriptions (although obscure) about the mermaid’s transformation and the supernatural involvement in the creation of the monstrous body. Like many female monsters, the mermaid is a product of a curse or an involuntary action (such as disease or birth). The choice of the word “appals,” which means dismays or horrifies, provides an insight that this passage is discussing her transformation. The transformation of her body into a physical form that is non-normative, she suggests, goes against nature itself (“heaven and earth”). Her transformation seems to disrupt nature as evidenced by the “shrieks of anguish” and the dividing of the rocks. Her boundary-crossing body and involvement with the supernatural upsets the natural balance, portraying the mermaid as the result of the disruption

of balance. This is an extension of Mellor's argument that some female Romantic writers saw nature as a friend; in the mermaid's case, nature forms with her a dark sisterhood.

The mermaid does have conflicting emotional reactions to her transformation and to her destructive work. It is notable that many of the mentions of conflicted feelings are related by her to bodily reactions or symptoms, demonstrating that she is not naturally a part of this scene nor is she an intruder. She says, "Mine was the choice, in this terrific form, / To brave the icy surge, to shiver in the storm" (II. 19-20). The importance of "choice" in this poem is central. The mermaid's agency to control the outcome of her own physical body and make her own decisions is essential to the discussion. The anxiety of the nineteenth-century's perceptions of female choice and agency is reflected here; the mermaid's decision to destroy is the potential of women to engage an "unnatural" behavior by also choosing to reject the mainstream interpretation of femininity. She calls her body "terrific," and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "terrific" before and during the early nineteenth century meant "causing terror, terrifying; fitted to terrify; dreadful, terrible, frightful." The mermaid does not describe her body's physical appearance except for this description, choosing to keep the events of her transformation mostly obscure. Therefore, her physical body is sublime. Indicated by the words "brave" (verb form) and "shiver," however, this does not seem to be a pleasant venture. She remains a boundary crosser physically, but also within her decision to seek destruction.

She also remarks on her soul's transformation. "Yes! I am chang'd. My heart, my soul, / Retain no more their former glow" (III. 21-22). This references a change of soul (mind) that accompanied her change of bodily form, the inner self transforms with the outer self. Later in the poem, she calls her heart "callous," meaning a loss of sensitivity and an onset of

bitterness and anger (VII. 69). Her emotional self has transformed with her physical body, which allows her to cross those boundaries that delineate feminine and unfeminine/masculine nature.

The partnership of nature and the mermaid for the purpose of destruction is the center of the poem. She says, "I lend new fury to the blast; / I mark each hardy cheek pale, / And the proud sons of courage fail" (III. 36-38). She continues, "To aid your [nature's] toils, to scatter death, / Swift, as the sheeted lightning's force" (VII. 61-62). Craciun writes, "[A]nd, because Bannerman's spirits of the storm are consciously feminized, even while inhuman, she simultaneously offers a protofeminist revision of the traditional associations of destruction with masculinity" (180). The mermaid is associating the feminized nature with destruction and with the sublime, rejecting the idea that beautiful is feminine and terror is masculine. Craciun's argument that this change is "protofeminist" comments directly on the undercurrent of the intellectual discussion of the call for female contribution. The mermaid allies herself with an anti-ideal version of the feminine nature thus subverting the view that women or the environment have a predictable and determined nature. The mermaid embodies this contrast and this effort to transgress norms of behavior. Additionally, the use of her voice as the mode of destruction, her weapon, brings vocalization to women's experience, demonstrating their vocal power to "narrate" their own lives and represent themselves. The mermaid's use of her voice as a tool of destruction reflects upon the fear and misunderstanding of women. The mermaid within the narrative is not making this argument, but her body reveals anxieties regarding the changing and developing ideas about the essentialist notions of the nature of women and their capabilities, and also complicates a Romantic tradition and Gothic tradition. The transformative monster female body in "The

Mermaid” is a reversal of the Romantic notions of the violence and terror of the sublime as masculine, and the connection between women and nature.

Chapter 3

Polluted Women: Vampiric Transformations of Carmilla and Lucy Westenra

Writers of Gothic literature popularized and developed one of the most memorable and polymorphic monster bodies in Western civilization and literature: the vampire. Although vampires are often romanticized in today's pop culture and have become recognizable figures of forbidden romance, the vampires in Gothic novels, while often seductive and beautiful, reflected a significant anxiety about the body and illness in the nineteenth century in British culture. The vampire allows a vision of a chaotic experience within a believable context; the vampire means a loss of control. The vampire, especially most of the female vampires, crosses a multitude of boundaries that the Victorians held most central to their social structure. The vampires Carmilla and Lucy Westenra embody the anxieties about disease and deviant sexuality, and their transformative bodies demonstrate the faultiness of a culturally prescribed female nature.

Because of the female vampire's position between life and death, her aggressive sexuality, and her transgressive and transformative body, she is an example of the supernatural abject Other. The vampire is terrifying as her body rejects natural laws and transforms. Kristeva writes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The undead body of the vampire is the abject because it is "in between." The female vampire's body resists placement into the socially constructed boundaries of what is natural for a woman and what is unnatural. The vampire crosses these boundaries when she transforms because of an infection, disturbing understandings of a fixed identity and any semblance of order or believability. The women

who become vampires, Carmilla and Lucy Westenra, cross these boundaries of what is considered the proper body and improper body through their Undead curse and their abnormal supernatural body cycle.

The image of the female vampire in literature began to change along with advancing times. Vampires' supernatural and transgressive bodies took on an eerie domestic and social aspect. They interacted with people, talked with them, created social connections, and were invited into homes. Many often appeared to be physically beautiful in a way that was both abject and attractive, providing them with the ability to better attract and seduce potential victims. While they attract, their transformative and transgressive bodies repulse once they are discovered to be Other and diseased, with the physical potential to spread the disease to other people. This reveals a Victorian concern with disease and cleanliness and a fear of improper bodies.

Many theories about the improper body created deep fears about disease and suspicion about abnormal bodies and sexual bodies; these bodies must be controlled and even destroyed or quarantined if they threatened social health and functionality. This need for control, it seems, stems from what Alison Bashford calls a Victorian obsession with "purity and pollution." According to Bashford, cleanliness and hygiene were highly emphasized for a healthy life, and the unclean aspects needed to be eliminated in order for life to function properly. This extended beyond just a clean home and more baths; this obsession was incorporated into the self. Health is a natural concern, and health standards are in place to protect citizens. Yet, the Victorians extended their preoccupation with cleanliness beyond dirt. Women were especially subject to this demand. Bashford writes:

It is also the case that in Victorian culture the dichotomy of purity and pollution cohered around, and produced the meaning of 'woman' with particular intensity. Women as a group, as well as individual women, were constructed by middle-class Victorian culture to embody both purity and pollution, to be potentially both Madonna and whore, angel and temptress (xii).

She continues, “. . . women’s purity and impurity were expressed at once morally and physically” (xii). The connection between the state of the body and the state of the soul become much closer and more critical, and the disease of vampirism featured in literature expresses within it this potential of women to degenerate if they became polluted.

In both novels, the female vampires exhibit similar symptoms of hysteria, a “disease” that affected both the body and the soul of women and led to many of the worries about pollution of mind and body. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes, “The hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children” (140-41). Hysteria seemed to provide a good explanation for much of the strange behavior of women since it affected the potential mothers of the empire, hysteria was a problem. Andrew Scull writes, “It [hysteria] was a tradition that firmly located an array of strange bodily symptoms that others might be tempted to attribute to the supernatural-to-bewitchment, or to possession by devils—to the material universe, and to disorders of the female body” (5). Thus, this belief supports the concept that an infected soul creates an infected body. In *Mass Hysteria*, Rebecca Kukla writes, “Hysteria, which was originally defined as the wandering of the womb, was thought distinctive in being able to mimic any other disease at all; this made it not only highly potent but also particularly wily and difficult to diagnose or rule out” (5). Vampirism, in several ways, mimicked hysteria. The pervading medical belief in hysteria further reinforced certain ideas about femininity and the female body. Tamar Heller explains

that doctors believed that hysteria gave affected women “. . . intense, even potentially insatiable, sexual desire” (78-79). Bashford suggests this links disease not only to a physical ailment, but also to a moral ailment that reflects upon the body and contaminates the purity of the self and the home. The Victorians had an emergency situation with a socially constructed disease.

Both *Carmilla* and *Lucy* display behaviors that could have been attributed to hysteria, further confusing doctors and friends. In fact, Heller observes:

The parallel between this story [*Carmilla*] and Mitchell’s image of the self-reproducing hysteric suggests an interdisciplinary dialogue: not only, for doctors[,] is the hysterical woman like a vampire but, in tales like *Le Fanu’s*, the vampire can be read as a figure for the hysterical woman. Moreover, as all this male nervousness about voracious women suggests, both the female hysteric and the female vampire embody a relation to desire that the nineteenth-century culture finds highly problematic (78).

Perhaps the belief in hysteria and anxiety about young women’s bodies and sexuality often prevents the characters in the novels from seeing the female vampires as anything but hysterics until an authority arrives who changes their perceptions of hysteria to perceptions of vampirism. The physical desires and behavioral oddities could be attributed to a feminine nervousness. Only when their transformative bodies are catalogued as vampires do the other characters recognize a bodily issue beyond hysteria.

New theories of disease were becoming popular later in the century that began to change many of the Victorian ideas of how disease spread. Germ theory, according to Martin Willis, began to gain attention around 1890, only seven years before *Dracula* was published. Interestingly enough, readers see the image of the possibly hysterical women in both *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, but with the expertise of Dr. Abraham Van Helsing and Dr. John Seward, both experienced doctors in *Dracula*, the outlook on Lucy’s illness begins to change

as her body sinks deeper into vampirism. Willis writes, “In the final decade of the nineteenth century the germ theory of disease gradually became the dominant scientific paradigm of infection, replacing the contagionist and miasmatist theories that had previously been regarded as scientific orthodoxy” (302). According to Willis, germ theory is the concept “that disease is caused by micro-organisms we know as bacteria” (312). Furthermore, he discusses the differences between the three theories and states, “However, germ theory did offer one clear difference from these previous systems of belief; that disease was the product of a living organic being—the microbe or bacteria—whose life, like the life of the vampire, depended on human illness” (312). Willis asserts that Stoker, instead of pushing a conservative agenda as many critics have argued, is presenting a variety of political and cultural ways of looking at disease; his thesis is summarized here: “What the novel is aiming to highlight is the ease with which disease can alter the social position of the infected individual and the ready associations between sexual conduct and propensity for infection” (Willis 316).

What this suggests is that when the other characters define Carmilla and Lucy’s vampiric illness, the opinions and perceptions of the young women’s reputations and bodies change drastically, making them recognizably transformative and transgressive. Carmilla and Lucy must be removed from society because of their illness and the ability to infect others both with the vampiric disease and the “disease” of immorality. The Victorian era demanded cleanliness morally and physically, and the female vampire risks spreading disease throughout society.

Carmilla

Published in 1872, Irish writer Le Fanu's vampire novella *Carmilla* remains one of the most landmark and innovative vampire tales, one that contributed to an updated interpretation of the vampire. This novella is often viewed as the inspiration for Stoker's *Dracula* (among others), yet *Carmilla* provides some unique characterizations of a female vampire, mostly because of Carmilla's lesbianism and seductive capabilities. *Carmilla*'s innovations in the literary conception of vampires owes much to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816) in a number of ways, although it is never stated outright that Geraldine, the transformative female invader and seducer of Christabel, is a vampire. It can be comfortably assumed that Geraldine is a vampire and shares the characteristics of transformative body, lesbianism, and manipulation with Carmilla. The poem also features a similar relationship between Christabel and Geraldine as Laura and Carmilla, a relationship marked by attraction and repulsion. Both Le Fanu's text and Coleridge's text contain a basic outline of events, although Coleridge's remains unfinished. The novella follows a common Gothic trope: a virginal young woman is threatened by an evil vampire and must be protected by a group of authoritative men who seek to save her life and dignity as well as their own power.

The young Laura lives with her English father in Styria in a solitary home amongst traditional Eastern European villages, which she refers to as "a lonely and primitive place" (Le Fanu 87). Laura is sheltered from the world and on the brink of womanhood, and while not purely English (she has a deceased Styrian mother), Laura is a potential lady, or as Marilyn Brock suggests, a potential "good English mother," a young woman raised to understand that her most important role is mother, the backbone of the home and the British

nation (120). This sheltering and solitude reflects upon Laura's vulnerability and the measures taken to keep her under watch (she has governesses and a childhood nanny) presumably in order to protect her from destructive outside influences. Desperate for more consistent companionship with an equal and devastated at the sudden death of one of her female friends, Laura leaps at the opportunity to befriend a beautiful young woman named Carmilla who is staying at their schloss after being dropped off by her "mother" after a carriage accident leaves her unable to travel.

Before Carmilla's guardian leaves her with Laura and her father after the carriage accident, the woman with Carmilla gives Laura's father some information in secret (Le Fanu 96). He later explains to Laura, "She [the supposed mother] expressed a reluctance to trouble us with the care of her daughter, saying she was in delicate health, and nervous, but not subject to any kind of seizure—she volunteered that—nor to any illusion; being, in fact, perfectly sane" (Le Fanu 99). The cultural concept of fragility and sensitivity as natural in a young woman distracts them from her suspicious and strange behavior; perhaps they consider her just a little hysterical. Carmilla also keeps up this performance of normality. Once she is "recovered," she encounters Laura's father and greets him pleasantly:

'Thank you, sir, a thousand times for your hospitality,' she answered, smiling bashfully. 'You have all been too kind to me; I have seldom been so happy in all my life before, as in your beautiful chateau, under your care, and in the society of your dear daughter.' So he gallantly, in his old-fashioned way, kissed her hand, smiling, and pleased at her little speech (Le Fanu 114).

This brief speech provides just one example of Carmilla's ability to expose the trouble distinguishing between the monster and the woman. She has such attractive characteristics that it becomes difficult to notice her non-normative identity. The first time Laura sees Carmilla in her home, she is lounging comfortably in bed, and Laura writes, "She was

slender, and wonderfully graceful. Except that her movements were languid—*very* languid—indeed, there was nothing in her appearance to indicate an invalid” (Le Fanu 102-103). This commentary begins the observations of Carmilla’s body; Laura notices in her a graceful sort of weakness, quite a trend for the mid-century woman, as Dijkstra notes (83). But she also possesses a strength and healthy vitality, and Laura frequently notes this strange contrast. Le Fanu allows the reader to recognize this physical crossing of the boundaries of sickness and health as both a cultural trend for women and a marker of something unusual. From first introductions, Carmilla seems to be quite an ideal young woman, but certain aspects of her body soon begin to unsettle Laura and disrupt Carmilla’s theatrics of normalcy.

From the beginning of their relationship, Le Fanu bonds the two psychically, and Carmilla and Laura recognize one another from a childhood memory. The remembrance of seeing Carmilla is “one of the earliest incidents of my life which I [Laura] can recollect” (Le Fanu 90). When she awakes alone in her room, she sees:

[A] solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed . . . [s]he caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed (Le Fanu 90).

This is the first contact of infection and an odd experience of a comforting embrace, pleasurable sensations, and a threatening penetration. Carmilla has what Butler refers to as a “lesbian phallus” (*Bodies* 88). Carmilla demonstrates her ability to penetrate Laura both physically (bite) and mentally (through their shared memories). This wielding of a phallic penetrative ability is threatening to the heteronormative order and to Laura’s purity, and the vampiric disease allows her the power of penetration to exchange, Le Fanu suggests, lesbian

desire and vampirism. Carmilla has created a performance that allows her to penetrate Laura's life through feminine intimacy and an aggressiveness that places her clearly outside of the boundaries of traditional femininity. Auerbach writes:

When Carmilla penetrates her [Laura's] household through dreams and tricks as well as bites—she presents herself as Laura's only available source of intimacy. Everything male vampires seemed to promise, Carmilla performs: she arouses, she pervades, she offers a sharing self. This female vampire is licensed to realize the erotic, interpenetrative friendship male vampires aroused and denied (*Our Vampires* 39).

This “sharing self” and the “interpenetrative friendship” presents a problem for the normative culture because men are left out of this intimate connection, and Carmilla gains control over Laura's physical self and her feminine knowledge of passion. This exemplifies Carmilla's transgressive powers that allow her to influence Laura's body and mind. Adrienne Antrim Major explains, “The confusion of gender and identity marks the growing anxiety with which Le Fanu manipulates his lesbian text. As the attraction between Laura and Carmilla becomes more explicit, it is more frantically coded as evil/Other and, even more threateningly unavoidable” (156). It is important to note that at the time the novel was written, a clear definition of lesbianism had not been developed (Heller 87). Auerbach's comments agree with this assessment, “Only among women, those specialists in romantic friendship, is vampirism embodied in a physical, psychic union the experts of the next century would label ‘homosexual’” (*Our Vampires* 51). This kind of union between two young women is established by Le Fanu as a predator/prey relationship. The sexual power Carmilla wields is directly correlated with the attempt to pass on the vampiric disease and intimacy through

penetrative methods. Carmilla crosses the boundaries of sexuality into lesbianism and the boundaries of individual bodies and minds.

While Laura and Carmilla quickly bond, Laura notes: “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 indescribably engaging” (Le Fanu 101). Although Laura is sheltered, she has a sharp reaction to the aspects of Carmilla that make her feel uncomfortable; Laura senses the abject within Carmilla, but she is unable to explain the reason for this inner reaction. “Languid,” “cold,” “melancholy” and “secretive” are also other adjectives Laura uses to describe her intimate friend, but these aspects are not necessarily revelatory to the rest of the party. It can be suggested that Laura reacts to Carmilla’s body as one would react to the encounter of something abject, but not visually abject. Carmilla’s body and presence is familiar to Laura, and yet unfamiliar, and this unfamiliar presence leads Laura to react with a feeling of undirected repulsion.

Boundaries of heteronormative sexuality are crossed early on in the novella as Carmilla begins to express an intimate interest in Laura. In fact, much of the scholarship on *Carmilla* focuses closely on Carmilla’s sexuality and Laura’s reactions to Carmilla’s influence. Cohen writes, “‘Deviant’ sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization” (9). Gina Wisker writes, “Feminist and queer theorists and critics might be troubled by the conventional critique of Carmilla as deviant, disgusting, to be exorcised from the family home, marginalized. It is a tale constructed by and valorizing conventional patriarchal values which condemn lesbianism as a form of vampirism” (126). Indeed, Carmilla’s passion for Laura and flouting of heteronormative sexuality does provide for a place for discourse about the

boundaries Carmilla crosses in her efforts to share intimacy with Laura. Le Fanu's vampire is especially monsterized because he portrays her search for intimacy as a predatory.

Major provides a description of the concerns about Carmilla's body, particularly her lesbian desires; she writes, ". . . the story of Carmilla emerges as a forbidden tale of the horror of feminine evil, represented by lesbian lust, which exposes, in its sexual extravagance, a terror of any woman, even the consumptive and collapsing, but above all the dead" (152). Carmilla, as a woman with the vampiric disease, is characterized by evil partially because of her transgressive femininity and sexuality, which is a threat to the patriarchal systems of marriage. Therefore, as Auerbach states, this culture was "haunted not only by the Undead, but by a monster of its own clinical making, the homosexual" (*Our Vampires* 83).

Auerbach suggests, "[V]ampires offered an intimacy that threatened the sanctioned distance of class relationships and the hallowed authority of husbands and fathers" (*Our Vampires* 6). The intimacy that the "ill" Carmilla has with the healthy Laura poses a problem because of the transference of the vampiric disease. Their intimacy, close proximity, and passionate relationship establish an unavoidable transference of disease, a contagist concept of disease as Willis might suggest. The disease is equated with Carmilla's passion, and the two are unavoidable. Their relationship and Carmilla's illness place Carmilla across the boundary between pure/polluted, and in order to continue her love affair/vamping of Laura, she must attempt to perform as if she is normatively feminine.

One of the revealing moments that exposes Carmilla's vampiric body and her ability to transform is when the two young women come across a funeral march featuring mourners singing a hymn for the burial of one of Carmilla's victims. Laura recalls:

Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepressible as ague. All her energies seemed strained to suppress a fit, with which she was then breathlessly tugging; and at length a low convulsive cry of suffering broke from her, and gradually the hysteria subsided (Le Fanu 106).

This sharp change is prompted by a religious sacrament, demonstrating the normative scene of Christianity and the young woman who reacts negatively towards this cultural norm. This moment is one of the first revelations that Carmilla is not normal; the reader is supposed to recognize that this reaction to Christianity is incorrect. This also demonstrates Carmilla's transgressive behavior caused by a physical reaction. Carmilla reacts automatically that shows a glimpse to Laura of Carmilla's strange behavior. However, Laura is not aware of the true cause of Carmilla's painful fit of rage, although Carmilla blames it on the noise of the funeral and the hymns (Le Fanu 106). Her attempt to hide her physical reaction is also of note considering that she is with Laura. Carmilla is attempting to hide her disgust for the Christian ceremony in order to continue her performance of normalcy. Her excuse seems inappropriate. Heller compares Carmilla's violent and transformative outburst to a "hysterical fit" (84). She continues, stating that the darkening of Carmilla's beautiful face symbolizes the idea that women are "angry, demonic, and [the] animalistically sexual Other" (84). Carmilla's outbursts and her peculiar behavior in front of Laura are cracks in her performance of normality and a reaction motivated by her transgressive and infected body.

While Carmilla's transformed facial expressions are indeed disturbing to Laura, Laura's encounter with Carmilla's shape-shifting cat body is evidence of Carmilla's bodily boundary crossing. Laura, in what she thinks is a waking nightmare, sees something strange in her room at night. She claims this brief moment is "the beginning of a very strange agony,"

which indicates her descent into weakness and disease caused by Carmilla's vampiring (Le Fanu 115). Laura recounts, "I saw something moving round the foot of the bed, which at first I could not accurately distinguish. But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat" (Le Fanu 115). This cat jumps onto her bed and bites her breast with its fangs, connecting this experience to the childhood memory of being bitten by Carmilla. After observing the cat's anxiety and restlessness and then being bitten, Laura says, "I saw a female figure standing at the foot of the bed, a little at the right side. It was in a dark loose dress, and its hair was down and covered its shoulders. A block of stone could not have been more still. There was not the slightest hint of respiration" (Le Fanu 116). After the figure opens the bedroom door and leaves, Laura states that it might have been Carmilla playing a trick on her. Carmilla's total transformation in physical form reveals her monstrous status as a transformative body. This is an even more drastic change from Laura's earlier observation of Carmilla's facial transformations when she witnesses the funeral procession.

This monstrous cat is Carmilla in what Dijkstra calls her "real appearance" (341). Dijkstra makes an interesting point with this statement but does not elaborate much on this perception. The suggestion that the animal form is Carmilla's true form instead of her female shape masks the aspect of herself that may be disrupt her performance of a normative female body. However, it also reveals a dual nature, as can be interpreted through her rapid transformation, almost in the blink of Laura's eyes. This specific transformation connects the monstrous woman to dangerous animals, demonstrating Carmilla's animal nature. This transformation even more clearly demonstrates the boundaries Carmilla's physical body crosses because of her vampirism. Additionally, portraying the lesbian vampire as a

predatory beast underscores Le Fanu's connection between Carmilla's lesbianism and predation. This scene also establishes Carmilla's manipulative abilities.

The description of the creature's behavior reveals Carmilla's own inner desires for Laura and her emotions as she patiently seduces Laura. Laura describes the cat's pacing, "[I]t continued to-ing and fro-ing with the lithe sinister restlessness of a beast in a cage. I could not cry out, although you may suppose, I was terrified. Its pace was growing faster, and the room rapidly grew darker and darker, and at length it was so dark that I could no longer see anything of it but its eyes" (Le Fanu 115-116). This is a mood-enhanced depiction of the sexual power Carmilla holds over Laura. This recognition of the animal's nervousness and restlessness reflects upon Carmilla's own anxiousness and restlessness while she waits to absorb Laura's life into her own. The contrast between the beast's anxious pacing and stalking stands in contrast with the figure of Carmilla standing stockstill. This is evidence of the truth of the Baron's discussion of the vampiric nature at the end of the novella. He says, "Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigour [sic] of its waking existence. The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem" (Le Fanu 146). The vigor is animalistic and the patience is superhuman, and Carmilla's transformation from female to beast back to female allows for a connection between the dual aspects of her nature and thus reveals an anxiety of women's potential dual nature.

The darkness of the room and Laura's own fear obscures the transformation process from beast to woman. Suddenly, the cat has disappeared and a female figure stands in its place. This quick change is suggestive of Carmilla's boundary crossing. The transformation reflects

upon Laura's inability to "see" Carmilla's dual physical existence as a vampire and the fact that her body is transformative. Additionally, the way Laura describes the cat is entirely different from the General's description of Carmilla's cat form, which he refers to as a black "great, palpitating mass" (Le Fanu 141). Auerbach notes the difference between the perceptions of the young, naïve woman and the protective father and attributes it to the domesticity in Laura's encounter. The fact that the door has to open in order to let out the young female figure indicates that "she [Carmilla] is all body, though a mutating one" (*Our Vampires* 48). She continues, "In her immateriality, the General's Carmilla is a monstrous mystery, while Laura's is as solid as the domestic setting" (*Our Vampires* 45). This reflects on the difference in perspective; Laura had general ignorance of Carmilla's effect on her health while the General had been made aware of the suspicion of vampirism earlier in his niece's disease. Laura's relationship with Carmilla is indeed part of a domestic scene and intimate. The domestic aspects of their encounters and the familiar cat figure enhance the Gothic sense of the terrors of domesticity. Something like the home or even a friend's presence seems so familiar and comfortable, yet an unfamiliar mystery seems to lurk within the otherwise familiar circumstances.

This also reflects a common trope that connects women to animals. Dijkstra writes, "When Carmilla whispers to Laura, 'You and I are one forever,' she is enunciating a truth that goes beyond the ostensible resolution of the story in the inevitable ritual exorcism of the bestial creature, for the evil in this narrative is the never-ending evil of all women—their blood link with the animal past" (342). Dijkstra continues, "The vampire Carmilla, then, is the eternal animal in woman, desperately struggling with the forces of civilization to reenter the body from which it has, the course of history, been expelled" (342). This reflects a

cultural anxiety of women by portraying non-normative females as resistant to civilization's order and difficult to control. Carmilla is the embodiment of that anxiety. Dijkstra points out common beliefs about female baseness, much closer to animals than even men. Carmilla, already a boundary crosser because she is a vampire and a lesbian, is shown as an animal, relating her deviant and transformative body to that of an animal. Carmilla's transformation into a black cat demonstrates one of the ways an anxiety about women is revealed through her and the way she utilizes her transformative body to pull Laura into the state of "agony." After the alert of Carmilla's murder of some village women, the similarities between the General's niece's own demise and Laura's, and the connections the men make to the ancient vampire family the Karnsteins, the men decide to seek out Carmilla's body for destruction, their emphatic response to the woman they determine is an invader.

After the General arrives near the end of *Carmilla* and explains the death of his niece, the party recognizes the similarities between the vampires Mircalla, the guest at the General's house, and Carmilla: they are the same woman. The General seeks revenge for his niece's death and the community men seek to end the deaths in the village. The General tells Laura's father, "I mean, to decapitate the monster" (Le Fanu 138). When Carmilla approaches, Laura notices, "On seeing him [the General] a brutalized change came over her features. It was an instantaneous and horrible transformation, as she made a crouching step backwards" (Le Fanu 142). She escapes, but her change and the fight with the General reveal that she is indeed a threat. Instead of immediately following her or seeking her out, the men get organized. The General says, "Tomorrow . . . the commissioner will be here, and the Inquisition will be held according to law" (Le Fanu 143). Laura only learns of Carmilla's destruction through a formal report from the Imperial Commission that includes signatures

and statements from male authorities. Carmilla's staking is performed by several men of authority. Indeed, before Carmilla figuratively castrates the men by removing their power over women, the men must reinstate the masculine phallus to assert their power. Butler describes the lesbian phallus as "potentially castrating" (*Bodies* 88). Because of her lesbian phallic domination over Laura instead of the normative male phallus, Carmilla becomes a castrating figure, a threat to heteronormativity.

These bizarre formalities that seem unnecessary turn the destruction of the vampire into a community-involved action, a plan much more involved than the General's intention of personal retribution. They make sure that the killing ceremony (as it seems) is done "in accordance with ancient practice" (Le Fanu 145). The spread of disease and the strength of Carmilla's performance engage them into action readily. They find her body in its tomb while she sleeps and stake her through the heart and decapitate her, burning the head and body soon after (Le Fanu 145). The staking can be seen as a castration of the lesbian phallus, and the decapitation of Carmilla's head can be seen as a castration as well. Heller writes:

Carmilla's execution suggests a feminized version of castration; moreover, the stake driven through the body of the lesbian vampire whose biting mimicked the act of penetration is a raw assertion of phallic power. Yet, in light of the tale's thematic of female knowledge, it is also telling that Carmilla is decapitated, and that her head, the site of knowledge and of voice, is struck off (90).

Heller continues by discussing that Carmilla's sexual knowledge poses a greater threat to the patriarchy because her knowledge is transferred from woman to woman without the involvement of men's knowledge. "Carmilla, in her erotically charged dialogues with Laura, tries to convince her friend that female sexuality and homoeroticism are natural," Heller writes (85). Carmilla continues pressing Laura for intimacy; through their sexualized encounters, Carmilla transfers knowledge to Laura without masculine guidance or

interference. She also flouts male authority and knowledge, saying, ““Doctors never did me any good”” (Le Fanu 109). Heller continues, “[T]he tale makes a similar metonymic association between female homoeroticism and female knowing, both processes that make women independent of male control” (89). The male authority figures decide to decapitate Carmilla according to the ancient methods, but her decapitation means something else: the removal of the female (specifically lesbian) thought and voice that could be thought to have “infected” Laura almost as much as the disease itself. Heller states, “. . . both the body of the lesbian and the mind of the victim she brainwashes are the site of a battle over who gets to define, and hence to control, femininity and its desires: women or the fathers, priests, and doctors who are the story’s male ‘knowers’” (80). The decapitation of Carmilla is the castration of the mental lesbian phallus, a reinstatement of male knowledge or the ability to men to control the knowledge of women.

The complete elimination of the body (burning the head and body), something the men in Stoker’s *Dracula* do not do and do not have to do, seems to support the suggestion that the men in *Carmilla* are concerned with the contagiousness of the vampiric disease. Obliterating the body allows them to assure the end of the disease. Their act is also done out of revenge, pushing them an extra step toward total annihilation of the targeted body. Her boundary-crossing body cannot be tolerated by the community because it disrupts a determined proper order. Boundary crossing is a disorderly action and marks these vampire women as deviants.

Laura is not left alone in interpreting her malady and Carmilla’s strange existence. Many male “experts” of various sorts are brought into the narrative, all providing anecdotal, historical, and observational evidence about Carmilla’s transformative abilities or the

vampiric body. In the conclusion of the novella, the Baron addresses the group and discusses his vast knowledge of vampire lore and existence. He says:

The amphibious existence of the vampire is sustained by daily renewed slumber in the grave. Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigor of its waking existence. The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life from its coveted victim . . . In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent (Le Fanu 146).

All of this information provides further insight into Carmilla's motivations and the exact nature of her performance. She appears as normally as possible and behaves in a subdued manner at first in order to grow more intimate with Laura. Though she first appears innocent, her behavior becomes increasingly disturbing to Laura, and she begins to reveal her fascination and desire for Laura. This emphasis on the vampire's search for "sympathy and consent" reflects the nature of the relationship between Carmilla and Laura. Carmilla's passion for Laura may not be simply about bloodlust but about a connection between two women. Others may determine the desire for sympathy and consent is about domination over another. The psychic connection between Laura and Carmilla contributes to this odd aspect of the vampire's behavior. Carmilla is obviously dominant over Laura but desires Laura to share herself and create a relationship. The Baron describes vampirism as "amphibious," a term that captures the life of crossing boundaries that the vampire experiences; it can live in both worlds, the world of the living and the world of the Undead, with perfectly adapted features that allow it to survive and succeed. Carmilla's fierce passion even is reduced to scientific terms that reflect an unemotional observation instead of a case of passion. Passion, like the non-normative body, is difficult to identify and define. The science behind their

encounters with Carmilla is the only way they can comfortably assess their experiences. The patience she exhibits also allows her to successfully avoid revealing just how she crosses the boundaries between normal young woman and vampiric seductress.

Lucy Westenra

The transformation of Lucy Westenra from English rose to the deadly vampire in Stoker's *Dracula* provides one of the best depictions of the female monster transformation process in literature and the body that results. In great detail, featuring several multiple perspectives, the description of Lucy's physical transformation from a beautiful, healthy young woman to an aggressive, violent vampire allows readers to see how her body changes as a result of the infection and the ways the men react to her vampire form. *Dracula* is a fascinating novel that presents a large amount of information, contexts, and artifacts within its pages, creating an innumerable amount of ways to process the novel and its characters. Lucy's transformation and vampirism differs greatly from Carmilla's behavior because, as Auerbach states, "No vampire, it seems, is like any other" (*Our Vampires* 87). And, since readers are allowed multiple perspectives of Lucy's body, more is revealed about how she crosses the boundaries between alive/dead/undead. Since Stoker provides such an incredibly detailed account of Lucy's transformation, I shall use the chronology of the disease's pace to discuss the various aspects of Lucy's transformation and the rapidly changing attitudes about her body as she transforms from woman to vampire. Instead of being kept in the shadows under the surface of the text, Lucy's boundary crossing as an undead body comes to the forefront to reveal Victorian fears.

Lucy is introduced at the beginning of the novel as an upper-class young woman and Mina Murray's dearest friend. Lucy has just chosen to marry Arthur Holmwood although she received "[t]hree proposals in one day!" from a total of three men: Dr. John Seward, Quincey Morris, and Holmwood (Stoker 64). While some scholars assert that this means Lucy has committed sexual indiscretions in order to gain positive attention, it seems as though Stoker establishes Lucy as a young woman with the potential to become a proper lady. This position and set of expectations make Lucy's tumble from her pedestal devastating to those around her.

The onset of the disease begins mysteriously when Lucy begins to have restless sleep. Mina writes in her journal: "Then, too, Lucy, although she is so well, has lately taken to her old habit of walking in her sleep . . . [Mrs. Westenra] is naturally anxious about Lucy, and she tells me that her husband, Lucy's father, had the same habit" (Stoker 81). As she gets worse, scientific opinions are introduced by Dr. Seward, the psychiatrist at a sanatorium, and Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, an experienced older doctor and professor who has encountered many strange illnesses in his lifetime. These present new perspectives on the body and mind of women, demonstrating a change in culture and science from when *Carmilla* was written. Through multiple perspectives and chronologically, Stoker allows insight into the way the other characters process Lucy's illness and the ways their ideas about what is happening to her body change as time progresses and as experts enter into the fray.

Mina worries, "I fear [Lucy] is fretting about something" (Stoker 106). To seek an educated opinion on Lucy's illness, the family invites Dr. Seward to observe her, introducing a medical and scientific perspective that demonstrates a continuing advancement in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. His journal entries chronicle Lucy's demise and

efforts to discover a cure or even a cause. Lucy herself even worries about her strange dreams and writes, “It is all dark and horrid to me, for I can remember nothing; but I am full of vague fear, and I feel so weak and worn out” (Stoker 119). From this testimony and other observations, it seems Lucy’s mind is disturbed. Arthur addresses similar observations in a letter to Seward: “Lucy is ill; that is, she has no special disease, but she looks awful, and is getting worse every day . . . I am sure that there is something preying on my dear girl’s mind” (Stoker 120). These nightmares and sleep-walking begin to suggest that Lucy’s mind and body are beginning the crossing between reality and dreams and the healthy body and the ill body. The men decide to call in another specialist since Dr. Seward is baffled, Dr. Van Helsing, “a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day; and he has, I [Seward] believe, an absolutely open mind” (Stoker 122). This open mind is the catalyst that pushes the group’s perceptions of Lucy’s illness from a mental disorder to a physical disorder, even one that seems impossible within the Victorian order.

Lucy continues to oscillate between the appearance of health and illness as the blood transfusions deemed necessary by Dr. Van Helsing are administered. Lucy’s appearance begins to change as she moves closer to the boundaries of life and undead. When she is described, she takes on the appearance of a corpse: “She was ghastly pale, chalkily pale; the red seemed to have gone even from her lips and gums, and the bones of her face stood out prominently; her breathing was painful to see or hear” (Stoker 130). Her obviously suffering body and appearance of bloodlessness prompt the men to transfer their blood into Lucy, thereby feeding her budding vampiric thirst and allowing her to enter “death” in a trance, resulting in the creation of a vampire (Stoker 171). However, unknowingly to the men, the blood transfusions temporarily give her the appearance and feeling of health, which are lost

when the effects wear away. This indicates her transition and the beginning transformations of her body. Her intake of the men's blood is often referred to, even by Dr. Van Helsing, as multiple marriages, but her hunger for blood demonstrates a consuming of masculine energy. Her body has necessary intakes of blood to physically transform into a full vampire. The strength and authority of the men cannot overtake Lucy's transformative body, showing them to be ineffective against Dracula.

After Lucy's death, the men notice a change from her pale, drawn, and weak body after death. They observe: "[s]ome change had come over her body. Death had given back part of her beauty, for her brow and cheeks had recovered some of their flowering lines; even the lips had lost their deadly pallor" (Stoker 173). Van Helsing's notice of this increasing beauty after death demonstrates his recognition of her undead nature and her existence as a vampire. Kristeva states that the corpse is the "upmost of abjection," but Lucy's beautiful corpse seems to capture the mixture of attraction and repulsion in the men and blurs the boundary in the binary system (4). Auerbach argues, "Vampires are so distinct from humanity that to know them is to dispel them; they can be catalogued, defined, and destroyed" (*Our Vampires* 65). After Dr. Seward and Van Helsing break into her coffin and see her beautiful undead corpse, Seward remarks, "I was, in fact, beginning to shudder at the presence of this being, this Un-Dead, as Van Helsing called it, and to loathe it. Is it possible that love is all subjective, or all objective?" (Stoker 215). This is one of the first times that Lucy is referred to by the men using impersonal terms ("it") and not by her personal, familiar name ("Lucy"). Her Undead body poses challenges because of her boundary crossing, and because of the distinction Dr. Seward tries to make between the "real" Lucy and the "other" Lucy, the boundaries blur because her body has transformed. In fact, the nature of the vampiric body

directly reflects life on the borders between the binaries of living/dead, another source of anxiety that reflects reactions to the abject body. It is only her behavior after the attack that positions her as a villainous, unsympathetic creature, thus supporting Willis's idea: "What the novel [*Dracula*] is aiming to highlight is the ease with which disease can alter the social position of the infected individual and the ready associations between sexual conduct and propensity for infection" (316). Hence, a diseased person is often associated with aggressive or aberrant sexuality and/or other unsavory or "dirty" behaviors. Willis's assertion certainly applies to how the men think of Lucy the uninfected versus Lucy the infected. Dr. Van Helsing explains:

Here, there is one thing which is different from all recorded: here is some dual life that is not as the common. She was bitten by the vampire when she was in a trance, sleep-walking . . . and in a trance could he best come to take more blood. In trance she died, and in trance she is Un-Dead, too. So it is that she differ from all other. Usually when the Un-Dead sleep at home . . . their face show what they are, but this so sweet that-was when she not Un-Dead she go back to the nothings of the common dead. There is no malign, there, see, and so it make hard that I must kill her in her sleep (Stoker 214).

Van Helsing's observation and thought process reflects on the transformative powers of the vampire that allow this dual existence while being able to attract victims to them. The intense Victorian fear of the rapid spread of illness and impurity helps motivate the men to find and destroy Lucy, and their desire to kill her stems from the patriarchal desire to control the female body and counteract Dracula and to remove the "perceived threat of aggressive female sexuality" (Brock 130). The adjective "perceived" is an important qualification to this discussion. While Lucy is alluring in her sleep, her sexuality, unlike Carmilla's, does not pose a real threat to the men. After Lucy becomes a vampire, she is not an agent of her own body as she is under a trance. She acts exclusively on her needs and does not seem to lead a

rich emotional life like Carmilla. However, the men seem to continue associating a conscious behavioral change with the transformative body. Arthur asks, ““Is this really Lucy’s body, or only a demon in her shape?”” Van Helsing replies, ““It is her body, and yet not it. But wait a while, and you shall see her as she was, and is”” (Stoker 228). Lucy’s state of vampiric existence is in a trance, and therefore she acts only on the vampiric physical urge and all actions that stem from that are motivated by need. Because of this, the men’s perceptions of Lucy’s sexual wantonness, impurity, and wickedness are based on their suspicions and fears of a boundary-crossing body. Because she is Undead in body, the Other, she must be evil.

This is demonstrated upon seeing Lucy as a vampire in action, Seward writes, “Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty and the purity to voluptuous wantonness” (Stoker 225). Additionally, when they see Lucy in her coffin, he notes, “She seemed like a nightmare of Lucy as she lay there; the pointed teeth, the bloodstained, voluptuous mouth—which it made one shudder to see—the whole carnal and unspiritual appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy’s sweet purity” (Stoker 228). These perceptions have less to do with her newfound physical appearance and more to do with the personal inner qualities attached to a woman whose body is outside of normative boundaries. Seward is affected by the abjection of the diseased female body, and he attributes qualities to the infected body that more accurately fit the horror of her vampiric form since this body is vastly different from Lucy’s normative body. The improper female body becomes their perception of Lucy, which in this case of vampirism is accurate. Upon the realization that Lucy’s death is in fact undeath, descriptions of her body focus more on perceived cruelty, sexual aggressiveness, and lust that is implied by the transformative body.

While their perceptions of her sexual transgressions upon seeing her body are inaccurate, they soon see Lucy as a vampire in action. *The Westminster Gazette*, a newspaper included in the text of *Dracula*, posts an article addressing a strange occurrence of bitten children and their sightings of the “Bloofer lady” (Stoker 188). Van Helsing knows Lucy is the attacker. The men corner her near her tomb as she holds a small child, and the image seems like a perversion of the holy Madonna and child imagery. Dr. Seward describes the scene: “With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone . . . There was a cold-bloodedness in the act which wrung a groan from Arthur” (Stoker 226). The men could have assumed that because Lucy is a woman, her natural behavior would prevent her from physically harming a child particularly based on the female anatomy. The pervading ideas that proper ladies were natural mothers and caretakers lead most of the men to realize the seriousness of Lucy’s vampiric body and the threats she presents because of her physical rejection of this norm. Seward states, “At that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing; has she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight” (Stoker 225). Once he witnesses her vampiric body rejecting constructed natural behavior, he is determined to destroy her. Her child toss is a symbolic rejection of motherhood and thus a rejection of Victorian feminine values.

Lucy then calls out to Arthur in “diabolically sweet tones” (Stoker 226). Lucy speaks seductively to Arthur, whispering, ““Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!”” (Stoker 226). This moment might seem to be a call to her fiancé, a sign of her sexual monogamy that refutes the usual portrayal of female vampires as sexually promiscuous.

Auerbach argues for this interpretation writing, “Not only do Lucy and the sister-brides in Castle Dracula prowl exclusively at men; Lucy, at least, becomes more virtuous after death than she was in life” (*Our Vampires* 79). Auerbach’s argument focuses on the change the disease has had on Lucy’s preference and its suggesting purifying effects. “Lucy the flirt is purified into Lucy the wife,” Auerbach writes (*Our Vampires* 80). However, this assertion seems to ignore Lucy’s vampiric behavior altogether because Lucy is only theatrically performing virtuous womanhood and wifely devotion when she speaks, not truly reflecting a vampiric sexual nature or virtue. This performance of gender is a survival technique to allow her to fulfill her body’s need for blood, much like Carmilla’s ability to create intimacy with Laura. This is also a misrepresentation of Lucy’s illness over the behavior designated by social constructs of nature. Her disease does not purify her either physically or morally. Due to the association of her body with lust and aggressive sexuality, even her performance as a monogamous wife cannot convince the men to believe her and allow her to seduce them. Auerbach does note that Lucy is “sexually orthodox,” which provides an interesting comparison between what is true of Lucy’s vampiric behavior and what the men perceive as wantonness (*Our Vampires* 81). What Auerbach means by this is Lucy is monogamous and heterosexual, but in spite of this fact, Lucy remains a boundary crosser and thus still violates nineteenth century perceptions of femininity.

Lucy’s staking has a noticeably less formal and more compassionate tone than Carmilla’s homicide. As the men look upon her beautiful sleeping figure, Dr. Van Helsing provides a rousing speech about stopping the spread of the disease by destroying Lucy, which supports Willis’s theory that Van Helsing is an early proponent of germ theory. But then, in a personal appeal, Van Helsing says, “But of the most blessed of all, when this now Un-Dead be made

to rest as true dead, then the soul of the poor lady whom we love shall again be free . . . she shall take her place with the other angels” (Stoker 229). Arthur, her fiancé, knows the staking is up to him. The men understand that Lucy’s death will bring peace to them, not a pleasure from vengeance like the staking of Carmilla. The staking of Lucy, like Carmilla’s, is a symbolically masculine phallic penetration and forces Lucy’s body to return to the natural life cycle and releases her from an undead body, thereby *allowing* her to cross back over the boundaries into the proper body’s place. However, Lucy’s death is still a reinstatement of patriarchal control. Auerbach writes, “Lucy’s staking confirms the authority of an armed community of fathers” (*Our Vampires* 98). Brock agrees: “Obviously, the huge stake is representative of the phallus, as Arthur’s act attempts to reinstate male reproductive power into Lucy’s infected body” (130). Her decapitation and staking seem less of an assertion of male knowledge and control than Carmilla’s execution, which can be perhaps attributed to Lucy’s heterosexuality versus Carmilla’s homosexuality. The decapitation moment is passed over briefly; Seward only writes, “Then we cut off the head and filled the mouth with garlic” (Stoker 329). Garlic has been used to ward away vampires elsewhere in the text so the garlic here is just a precaution, but since it is filling the mouth instead of used around the body, it does depict the assertion of male control. Lucy is never able to use her voice to seduce or her teeth to penetrate again.

Regardless, the men seem more concerned with returning Lucy to peace and purity rather than enacting revenge. Auerbach’s assertion that “. . . Stoker cleaned up more than he degraded” is correct overall (*Our Vampires* 79). Lucy is portrayed most consistently as a victim of a disease in spite of the accusations made regarding her threatening sexuality. By killing Lucy, the men end the spread of the vampiric disease and reinstate their memory of

Lucy as the woman they loved, not the monster in the mausoleum. Now that she can no longer cross those boundaries between living and Undead and remains in a definable place, she ceases to be a threat to order.

Seward writes, “There, in the coffin lay no longer the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate . . . but Lucy as we had seen her in her life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity . . . One and all we felt that the holy calm that lay like sunshine over the wasted face and form was only an earthly token and symbol of the calm that was to reign for ever” (231). Her body no longer defies the laws of nature and reflects the life cycle once again; her body is nothing to be feared because it is again a normative dead body. She becomes “pure” again, and she ceases to be just a “Thing”; she becomes “Lucy” again, the woman they loved. Seward’s comment “the calm that was to reign forever,” emphasizes the return of the female Undead to within boundaries in which a normative female would belong.

The female vampiric body poses challenges to the essentialist notions of female and human nature. Her body can express several characteristics that defy essentialist notions of the female sex’s nature, but the two vampires still manage to remain female in appearance and retain some feminine behaviors which are necessary to function in society and allow her to quench her thirst. Because she is a vampire, she is undead, placing her outside an even wider boundary—that of the living. Her body defies not only normal feminine behavior, but what society would label “human” behavior. The illness places her within the perceived realm of femininity, but this is only a bodily transformation that implies performance. Because of the transformations, the female vampire lacks a fixed identity. Her body is linked to this vague concept of the ill and vampiric bodily identity and cannot exist apart from it. Her body’s needs drive her behavior and her need for performance. However, the subversion

and commentary on the patriarchal culture in which she is trapped allows a location for challenging discourse about gender, sexuality, and the Victorian culture's opinions of the constitutions of disease.

Chapter 4

Lifting the Veil: Degeneration and Helen Vaughan

“Mary Ann Cotton
 She’s dead and she's rotten
 She lies in her bed
 With her eyes wide oppen [sic]
 Sing, sing, oh, what can I sing
 Mary Ann Cotton is tied up with string.
 Where, where? Up in the air
 Sellin’ black puddens a penny a pair” (Appleton n.p.)

This peculiar little rhyme is just one of many of the macabre nursery rhymes that seemed to be popular with children in the Victorian era. This rhyme is about one of the first English female serial killers, Mary Ann Cotton, a woman who murdered many of her children, lovers, and husbands by poisoning them with arsenic. Arthur Appleton’s profile of Cotton’s crimes and trial provides a great deal of insight about Cotton herself and the Victorian culture that villainized and prosecuted her. According to Appleton, Cotton murdered between fifteen and twenty victims between about 1864 to 1872. She moved from town to town and frequently remarried, sometimes bigamously, producing many children by multiple men. Notably, Mary Ann changed names and identities as she moved around to avoid suspicion and detection. She was eventually arrested and charged for only one murder, her young stepson (Appleton). In an 1873 article, “Passing Events at Home and Abroad,” the writer discusses the case and the trial thoroughly in just a few columns. From the article’s tone, the writer seems to be in shock that this middle-aged, West Auckland wife and mother could have murdered her own child. The writer states, “As to the motives, he suggested the probability that the prisoner had been anxious to remove the child because it was a tie upon her, because she had no natural love for the child, and because she was desirous of securing the insurance money, which she

could only obtain by its death” (“In Court”). The newspaper article continues, “She appeared to have given way to that most awful of all delusions that seemed to take possession of persons wanting in proper moral and religious sense, that she could carry out her wickedness without detection, and that she could carry it on in secrecy” (“In Court”).

Cotton’s image and her complex story fascinated and disgusted readers, shocked that a woman who appeared so normal and functioned in society could perform such heinous acts. Newspapers sensationalized her story, paying close attention to developments in her case. Appleton describes how the *Newcastle Journal* referred to her as “a monster in human shape” and was shocked at her actions (103). The research shows that one of the newspaper reporters wrote, “Perhaps the most astounding thought of all is that a woman could act thus without becoming horrible and repulsive” (103). Indeed, Cotton looked like a normal middle-aged, working class wife and mother, but the newspapers dug deeper, portraying her as a heartless monster that should be gotten rid of as soon as possible (103). The newspaperman’s wonder that she did not physically appear to be menacing or monstrous in appearance (ugly or disfigured) is one of the bases of my argument in this section: characters in the late nineteenth century Gothic novels struggle with realizing the transformative characteristics of the female monster body’s makeup when the outer appearance is not somehow deformed or indicative of evil. Cotton managed to shock the nation and shake the strict ideologies of women’s natural behavior to the core, showing the capability women had to challenge social constructions and their own supposed nature in such violent ways. To the public, Cotton was a monster in a woman’s skin, and the character Helen Vaughan in Arthur Machen’s novella *The Great God Pan* reflects this anxiety.

The Great God Pan was published at the end of the nineteenth century (1894) and features one of the most enigmatic and frightening female monsters of the Victorian era. Helen Vaughan is quite popular in the bourgeois London society and is later discovered to have had several husbands and conquests. However, Helen, like Cotton, is a woman of violence. Helen, while appearing fairly normative in appearance possesses one of the most horrific bodies in Gothic literature. In fact, the character Villiers thinks to himself that the investigation of the strange suicides is like a “nest of Chinese boxes” (Machen 43). While this description is observant of the case, the phrase can refer to Helen’s own body, as the investigators soon discover.

Machen captures some of the most poignant anxieties of the late Victorian era in his fictional, yet familiar social atmosphere. The turn of the century was approaching, science was secularizing the culture, and the world was changing. Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution had moved beyond the field of evolutionary biology and infiltrated all aspects of cultural thought. Adaptation or failure to adapt was applied to society. This ongoing effort to redefine bodies and life is reflected in *Pan* through confusion over Helen’s transgressive body while she subverts and blurs boundaries.

Machen’s infusion of several elements including Gothic sentiments adds to this uncomfortable affect created by a monstrous woman. Adrian Eckersley writes, “The atmosphere of the stories [Machen’s various stories, including *Pan*] is maintained by a mixed appeal to a rag-bag of occultism, folklore, archaeology, and remnants of the Gothic.” He also invokes biology, mysticism, mythology, and contemporary scientific and social theories (283). The Gothic appears in *The Great God Pan* with Helen as the mysterious evil woman, a claustrophobic sense of space, questions of reality and imagination, and an aberrant

antagonist whose very essence and existence disrupt the social concepts of nature and femininity. Machen was Welsh, and according to R. Ellis Roberts, he was a spiritual man whose writing was highly influenced by his Celtic heritage (353). According to Roberts, Machen wrote “from a deep spiritual conviction” that makes the expression of evil “persistent and powerful” in his work (354-55). Indeed, in *The Great God Pan*, Machen seems to be preoccupied with evil and how it enters into the material world. Roberts asserts that Machen’s writing invokes a “continuous sense of the reality of those other worlds which surround, protect, threaten, and at times invade the world of fact and appearance” (355). Therefore, Machen’s work contributes to the discussions of nineteenth century concerns by creating an atmospheric novel that results in a feeling of anxiety. In *Pan*, the reader and the characters are vaguely aware that they are in the presence of the Other. What they do not discover until the end, however, is that this Other does not appear to be an invader, but one of them. Helen’s body demonstrates another Victorian concern: degeneration.

Villiers, says, “But you [Austin] and I, at all events, have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form” (Machen 91). At the end of the Victorian era, it would seem that these “secret places of life” have all but been revealed, yet an anxiety about the unknowability of nature still haunted anyone, including Machen. In his essay discussing the theme of degeneration in Machen’s work, Eckersley writes:

The answer is that the sense of moral evil traditionally associated with religion had only changed its character, not dissolved. From the Enlightenment onwards, the imagery of evil was being translated gradually from a spiritual to a scientific register. . . the priest’s sanctions of spiritual damnation were being replaced by the medical man’s ideas of biological *degeneration* (277).

Degeneration or reversion means “to lose the properties of the genus, to decline to a lower type,” but during the nineteenth century, Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman write that the concept extended past biological and physical sciences and influenced social theory, history, and literature. “Finally, and for all its connection with natural phenomena, its most powerful association was with something unnatural, even—or perhaps especially—when associated with natural desire or supernatural dread” (iv). They continue:

Degeneration belongs to those topics that are compelling as ideas and unnerving as realities. In a century that came increasingly to believe that the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world is no longer a dream, the ubiquity of generation had a powerful appeal. It provided a context for the interpretation of situations, and a text for speculation (iv).

The concept suggests humankind may not always move forward in evolution and adaptation but has the potential to revert or degenerate into an “inferior” form of life. When progress is the goal of a nation, degeneration becomes a fear. Twenty-first century Western societies seem to be concerned with the effects of humans on the environment. Eckersley writes, “A century ago, however, when the era of ‘hard’ naturalist science was at its peak, the material body was often invoked as root cause of variations in behavior” (278). Therefore, the human body acted upon itself only and was the source of the body’s problems, not the result of an outside influence. Helen’s body reflects this fear of degeneration especially since there was a specifically “degenerative possibility” in women (Eckersley 285). This idea of degeneration will inform the discussion of Helen’s transformative body and the fear and apprehension that the men in the novel express.

The concept of the degenerative body taking a “normal” appearance suggests some aspect of performance in a public arena, and the ever-present threat that someone is not who or what they seem haunts the men in *Pan*. Helen Vaughan’s body encompasses intense fears about

the unknowability of nature and thus the female body. Evil has a female form in *Pan*. Her boundary crossing between supernatural and natural, degenerative and progressive is what makes Helen a figure of anxiety, and, as we shall see later, *panic*. Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan* is one of the most poignant examples of an expression of these anxieties by an exaggerated transformative and transgressive body and ultimately demonstrates individual physical degeneration.

Helen remains a side character in the novella, always lurking in the shadows alone; she is given no voice and no direct confrontation with the main male characters until the end of the novella. Thus, we have a monster female who has agency and mobility of her own but is still relegated to the edges of the narrative. While Helen is popular within the upper class, there is an undertone of sexual activity that is never forthrightly mentioned, only hinted at.

Suggestion of Helen's sexual prowess is also an unspoken reason that the men see her as such a threat and also perhaps how she perhaps lures men into her home. Sexual aggressiveness and female sexual desire would be considered by the Victorians as unfeminine and hence outside the boundaries of natural femininity. However, it is not her sexuality that bothers the men in the novel; her strange behavior after they have a personal encounter with her has a lasting effect and what truly bothers them in these moments is never revealed. Before the men find out about her physical body, Helen already transgresses across boundaries of proper feminine behavior.

The majority of the plot deals with several male characters, most centrally Villiers, Clarke, and Austin, researching the circumstances surrounding several suicides of wealthy men in London. Through testimonies, letters, and interviews, the men continuously encounter the name "Helen Vaughan" or her various aliases and people associated with her. They

discover that she has a strange history, several former husbands, and a talent for social mobility. Further investigation and various encounters lead the men to believe Helen is somehow associated with these suicides because the men always commit suicide after spending time alone with her or are driven insane. Stories of her strange and isolated childhood explain how she caused some of the children in her village to go insane, which lead the men to suspect Helen is more than just the average femme fatale. Villiers decides to corner Helen and force her to either confess and give herself to the police or commit suicide. She commits suicide, and one of the men later reflects upon the horrific changes her body exhibited during her death. Her body exhibits a multitude of disturbing transformations that horrify them, and her life and death seem to leave more questions than answers.

She hides the secret, evading identification and categorization. Unlike the vampires who, if their behavior is observed closely, can be marked as “vampire” and a distinct way to destroy them and restore order is enacted, Helen remains an enigma. The discovery of her transgressive body is only revealed through her destruction. Degeneration at the point of death becomes apparent, and she crosses the widest variety of boundaries seen in this thesis, essentially breaking down and blurring all culturally constructed boundaries that surround the body. Helen’s transgressions and transformations allow for insight into the weakness of strict constructs of the body and the ability to transcend beyond prescribed limits. Because she is female and a sexual female, she is already regarded as a lesser being, and her physical makeup provides an example of the suspected “beast within” a woman and the depth of her transgressive behaviors. Yet, her supernatural, hybrid status creates significant confusion. Helen Vaughan’s life is a perfect conglomeration and exaggeration of cultural concerns. The

circumstances of her unnatural birth provide some insight on the interpretation of Helen's body.

“You may think this all strange nonsense; it may be strange, but it is true, and the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan,” Dr. Raymond says as he talks to his friend Clarke more in depth about the scientific experiment he is planning to perform (Machen 14-15). *The Great God Pan* begins with an account of a science experiment on a young woman's (Mary's) brain that Dr. Raymond, the experimenter, calls “transcendental medicine” (Machen 14). However, healing is not what he is attempting to achieve. He states that with a small incision in a small area in the brain she will have a unique experience; “lifting the veil” should allow her to see beyond the material world and into the spiritual world. This is a mixture of scientific methods (experimentation, observations, surgery, early psychiatry) and esoteric beliefs of seeing beyond the material into the spiritual; all of this is encompassed in his word “transcendental.” Of course, the prefix “trans-” indicates that which is “beyond” or “across” certain boundaries. Even through her strange conception, Helen is already a trans figure. Dr. Raymond comments that “immense studies have been made recently in the physiology of the brain,” an obvious reference to the achievements in science during that time and a way for him to validate this experiment (Machen 15).

Mario Pasi traces this experiment back to the influence of esotericism during the late 1800s. He writes, “One common feature of esoteric systems of thought is the idea that under certain conditions, man is able to have access to aspects of reality that normally cannot be the object of perception or experience” (64). Dr. Raymond's experiments are a problem; his desire to see beyond the realm of the observable, the empirical restraints of his science,

pushes forward the vague concept of the immaterial over concern for reason and health. Dr. Raymond performs this surgery under the auspices of an esoteric effort that seeks “the light” (Machen 66). Dr. Raymond speaks of Pan as a metaphor for the ecstasy and wonder at seeing past the observable world, yet in Mary’s reaction and subsequent descent into an invalid state and the birth of Helen, the experiment has invited in an experience of darkness and negativity, not usually a goal of esotericism. Mario Pasi writes, “Pan here [in the beginning of the novella] seems to be just a metaphor for the spiritual reality that exists beyond our senses; but in fact, as the story unfolds, the reader realises [sic] that it is a real, concrete entity as well” (71). It becomes obvious due to Mary’s sudden pregnancy that Pan is not just a metaphor, but a real figure with power that extends beyond the mind and invades the body.

The free and unauthorized use of Mary’s body and mind reflects scientists’ attitudes about experimentation and human life. “As you know, I rescued Mary from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child; I think her life is mine, to use as I see fit,” Dr. Raymond brags (Machen 17). He has a willingness to risk life, particularly that of a woman, in order to allow him to achieve new knowledge. Mary is also depicted as pure and innocent, the image of the angel. Dijkstra writes, “Man, creative and intellectual, was destined to soar to even higher levels of mental achievement, while woman, incapable of the higher forms of evolution, was doomed to remain a simple tool of nature, a domestic animal, one might say whose sole responsibility was the reproduction of the race” (171). Mary is a tool of scientific advancement, expendable because of her gender and her class. As stated earlier, this failed experience pushes Mary into an almost vegetative state and results in an actual physical pregnancy. As evidenced by her brief positive reaction, with her hands

stretched out and her eyes shining, and her quick retreat into terror is apparent that this experience of “Pan,” is very much real to her. Dr. Raymond writes in a letter:

What I said Mary would see she saw, but I forgot that no human eyes can look on such a sight with impunity. And I forgot, as I have just said, that when the house of life is thrown open, there may enter in that which we have no name, and human flesh may become the veil of a horror one dare not express (Machen 104).

The physical manifestation of this reality is the pregnancy that results. Pan impregnates Mary, and Helen Vaughan is the human flesh that veils the horror of this combination of woman and god.

Pan is a complicated and enigmatic figure in the novel, creating confusion and spaces of darkness and emptiness within the text. Philippe Borgeaud states in his article that Pan was a frequent and popular figure in ancient religions and was an enigmatic figure that interested a multitude of individuals. He goes on to state that Pan appeared in many nineteenth century works. He explains, “[T]he evocation of the death of the great Pan has served to express a major contradiction within our culture; it erupts forth like some mysterious and dramatic author in the mingling of Christian waters with the pagan” (267). Machen was a part of this tradition of blending, partially due to his interest in mythology, mysticism, and Christianity. Pan is a reference to an ancient figure that is revived in his text as “The God of the Great Deep” (Machen 103). This “Pan” figure is difficult to define, a main mystery in the novel. Dijkstra comments on the Victorian practice in art and literature that provides an opportunity to “update the images provided by classical mythology” (238). Machen updates Pan into a much more sinister figure than the most commonly referenced depiction.

Pan is most recognized as the satyr trickster god in Greek mythology, a hybrid of a human male torso and head and goat legs. Like the other gods and demigods, he reigned over

multiple realms including shepherds, fertility, and the spring, all associated with nature. He was usually depicted with his lyre in forest scenes, chasing nymphs. In fact, throughout the novella, there are frequent appearances of fauns and satyrs including a statue a young boy recognizes as the “man in the wood” with whom he saw Helen playing (Machen 32), and the men find a manuscript of drawings that include fauns and satyrs and an unsettling drawing of Helen’s face (Machen 67).

However, Borgeaud also refers to another Pan, a son of Zeus. While forgotten for centuries and only used as a prototype for the Christian image of Satan, the figure of Pan enjoyed a comeback during the Romantic period and in nineteenth-century occultism and neopaganism. However, Borgeaud remarks that a darker Pan figure exists, stemming from a Christian interpretation of Pan:

This interpretation is founded upon the ‘folk etymology’ of Pan's name understood from the time of Plato as meaning "all" (a play on the words Pan and pan) and interpreted by Eusebius (perhaps following Plutarch, but in a different sense) as symbolizing the totality of demons, that is to say, the gods or demigods of Graeco-Roman polytheism cast out by the Christ (266).

Pan becomes not just a figure of frivolity, but a demonic figure that is characterized by the word “all.” This inconsistency in the interpretations of Pan comes from the blending of the pagan and Christian imagery, allowing for multiple appearances in different works. Machen combines both the image of the satyr and the Christian-based image of evil embodied, both suggested by the invocation of Pan.

Pasi writes that in the novel “Pan plays a role that is directly opposed to the one modeled on the perspective of the Romantics and their later occultist emulations” (71). In several accounts, it is mentioned that young Helen played in the woods with a naked male figure, presumed to be Pan. Machen suggests that the attempt at the esoteric experience and the

resulting birth of Helen allowed Pan to essentially become a material entity, releasing his unique brand of evil into the world. A physical manifestation allows Pan to be close with his young daughter as well perhaps not as a traditional father figure but as the direct heredity source and influence of evil. In fact, Dijkstra establishes a tradition of images like this in Victorian art: “There were always new versions of the contemporary woman disguised as a nymph fooling around with a satyr” (277). The “contemporary woman” is depicted as a non-traditional, sexual, frivolous woman, not the image of proper femininity expected of women during the nineteenth century. This demonstrates several ideas about Helen and her body; Dijkstra creates a connection with the notion of a chaotic, uncontrolled sexuality and a “degeneration” of feminine respectability (277). The art that depicts women and satyrs together and women participating in bacchanal activities demonstrates a concept of woman uncontrolled by men, associating with animals, and giving in to her sinful, sexual urges. “Thus woman became a nightmare emanation from man’s distant, pre-evolutionary past, ready at any moment to use the animal attraction of her physical beauty to waylay the late nineteenth-century male in his quest for spiritual perfection,” writes Dijkstra (240). Pykett discusses a concern in the 1890s that woman’s “link with nature” would result in “a monstrosity—something which having ceased to be woman is not yet man” (14). In the case of this novella, Helen is this result, but her situation extends even beyond walking the line of gender binaries, and she crosses the boundaries of the natural and the supernatural. Helen’s strange birth and body present a significant problem for Victorian society and illustrates her crossover of boundaries of natural and supernatural, but her death, one of the most disturbing and memorable in all Gothic literature, poses the most complex problems and reveals even deeper fears of the female body.

Helen cannot be defined as one side of any boundary, and this gray, undefined area creates anxiety in the characters in the novella and to the reader. Mr. Herbert, one of Helen's former husbands, says to Villiers, ". . . that woman, if I can call her woman, corrupted my soul" (Machen 42). His interesting comment that first refers to Helen as "woman" and then backtracks on his terminology accurately reflects the difficulty these men undertake when trying to "figure out" Helen. It also indicates the gray area Helen creates because of her boundary crossing. Mr. Herbert does not comment on whether it is her behavior that makes her unwomanly or her body, and the men do not seem to dwell on his change of vocabulary. He continues to reveal a pervading idea about the monstrous woman: she might not always reveal her monstrosity through her physical appearance. Austin provides a witness report of Helen behaving like a normal woman. He says, "You must remember, Villiers, that I have seen this woman, in the ordinary adventure of London society, talking and laughing, and sipping her coffee in a commonplace drawing room with commonplace people" (Machen 86). Villiers even provides a significant background of Helen's social climbing (Machen 88). This demonstrates that Helen's public performance is convincing enough to earn her renown in the social class that defined the characteristics of female nature and proper behavior. Like Cotton's case, it seems impossible that evil would not reflect on the physical appearance. However, Austin does note other witness reports in which people say that "she (Helen) was at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on" (Machen 47). The word "repulsive" makes it clear that Helen has the same combination of attraction and abjection that is present in most other examples of the monster feminine. Helen is an exaggerated, nightmarish expression of what lurks in the Proper Lady's shadow (Poovey 4).

If a monstrous female like Helen can imitate the Proper Lady, what does that say about the validity of the concept of the Proper Lady?

Throughout the novel, the men discover that Helen has multiple aliases, mostly married names. However, names are not indicative of Helen's developing and changing self because the names are only ways to perform more effectively in society. The names, and their associations with various men, allow her mobility. Mr. Herbert tells them, "Only human beings have names" (42). Butler writes, "The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (*Bodies* 8). Interpreted in the context of Helen's need to change aliases, her different names create a situation in which Helen is not confined by boundaries like other people. This allows her to cross literal boundaries of nation and class, indicated by her frequent moving from place to place and social climbing. These various aliases also allow her to hide her suspicious past. The names, like her body, are a performance, a veil over her true identity, more Chinese boxes. She successfully lures men back to her house, where she "entertains them." Villiers presents a manuscript to Austin, an eyewitness account of what Helen does to men when they are in her house. He says:

'Run your eye over it, Austin. It is an account of the entertainment Mrs. Beaumont provided for her choicer guests. The man who wrote this escaped with his life, but I do not think he will live many years. The doctors tell him he must have sustained some severe shock to the nerves' (Machen 90).

Even a brief glance at the manuscript deeply disturbs Austin. "Austin took the manuscript, but never read it. Opening the neat pages at haphazard his eye was caught by a word and a phrase that followed it; and, sick at heart, with white lips and a cold sweat pouring like water from his temples, he flung the paper down," observes Villiers (Machen 90). While undetermined and unspoken, actions that are upsetting enough to warrant the comment that

“the dread and horror of death itself . . . are as nothing compared to this” are markers of a being that test the men’s concept of the capabilities of woman, a similar stance men took when hearing about the infamous Cotton (Machen 90). The outer self does not reflect the secrets of the inner self, a discrepancy that the British undoubtedly struggled with as the nineteenth century progressed in complexity of thought. However, the horror of Helen’s transgressive behavior and body are finally physically revealed upon her death bed.

The death scene of Helen is described twice in the novel, and both times in similar ways because both descriptions are located within a manuscript found at Dr. Matheson’s home. The first description is included in a letter that begins, “Whether science could benefit by these brief notes if they could be published, I do not know, but rather doubt” (Machen 97). This “doubt” that a scientific journal or even other scientists would be interested in this description captures the challenges these men faced when observing a body that defied scientific explanation of all kinds in a society where burgeoning modern science was beginning to determine the perception of the natural world. Throughout the novella, there is also a reluctance to pass on information about Helen in order to preserve their fellow man’s sanity and well-being; therefore, this suggests the need to keep such a boundary-crossing death private, letting it die away with her. Helen’s death is a physical example of degeneration, one that exaggerates the Victorian anxiety about degeneration to its extreme. From what previous discussions and the notes provide, the reader can assume that two of the men decide that they will force Helen to commit suicide by hanging or they will reveal her to society as a monster. The men have already determined that she is an enigma who somehow leads men to take their own lives, but they do not suspect the actual horror of her physical body and its ability to transform. Helen selects to kill herself, and one of the men observes:

I was then privileged or accursed, I dare not say which, to see that which was on the bed, lying there, black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve. . . Here too was all the work by which man had been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed (Machen 98, 99).

The association with the horror of biological degeneration is depicted here in its physical manifestation. Not only does Helen not have a solid and definable body any longer, but she encompasses all of nature, all living beings, which in its excess creates a void, the “abyss of all being” that her father Pan represents.

While this is quite a unique scene in literature, it also reflects upon medical ideas of the time and the observations on the human body and its natural processes. Foucault writes, “The process of death, which can be identified neither with those of life nor with those of disease, are nevertheless of a nature to illuminate organic phenomena and their disturbances” (*The Birth* 143). Dr. Matheson writes, “I know that the body may be separated into its elements by external agencies, but I should have refused to believe what I saw. For here was some internal force, of which I knew nothing, that caused dissolution and change” (Machen 98). So while her change is bizarre and seemingly unnatural, it is natural because it comes from an “internal force,” and the forms she assumes are natural, “organic” forms, contracting the culture’s interpretations of natural bodies and behaviors. In Helen’s death, a wide variety of “disturbances” are revealed by the breaking down of her body. The observer struggles with watching his former knowledge refuted with his observation of the body’s shape-shifting. The imagery of this passage is strong, describing the shifting of Helen’s body from its shell

(“firm structure of the human body”) to a “melt[ing]” and “dissolv[ing]” body. The assumption that the observer makes—“the firm structure of the human body I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant”—reveals his shock and discomfort with the boundary crossing of Helen’s body that contradicts his own knowledge and experiences.

Because of the associations of women’s bodies with the earth, degeneration is potentially more of a possibility within the boundaries of the woman’s body. Dijkstra writes, “Lodged in the earth, needing the earth—being, indeed, the very personification of that moist, fertile earth—woman was like a swamp, a palpitating expanse of instinctive physical greed” (237). Helen’s dying body represents the entire chain of being. Eckersley writes, “Machen is a master at drawing a wide web of associations, never making anything too explicit, but . . . in *The Great God Pan* lurks a sense that sexuality itself is demonic, part of the primeval slime” (284). Her degeneration from woman and below is representative of the idea that evil is attached to the body, and for the later Victorians, what could be more evil than that which disturbs order?

The inclusion of the word “adamant” to describe the normal human body is an interesting authorial choice. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, adamant is an “alleged rock or mineral, as to which vague, contradictory, and fabulous notions long prevailed. The properties ascribed to it show a confusion of ideas between the diamond (or other hard gems) and the loadstone or magnet, though by writers affecting better information, it was distinguished from one or other, or from both.” While it is permanent and solid (like the observer assumes about the human body), the stone is indistinguishable from a diamond in many cases. One could say that the adamant is in a disguise of sorts; it masquerades as a

diamond, but its inner qualities are mostly unknown and “vague.” This stone is mentioned on purpose because its qualities mirror Helen’s qualities.

The observer writes, “The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed” (Machen 104). “The principle of life” is never defined here nor does the text provide a suggestion of what the observer is referring to as the basis of life. The writer just makes it clear that Helen is a living thing. Despite the fact she is living, she becomes formless at the last rung of the “ladder,” a “jelly,” and then climbs back up the chain of being that would take her from physical nothingness to her female shape (Machen 99). At one moment, the writer even seems to suggest that Helen takes on a form similar to the images of Pan previously noted. He writes:

. . . for one instance I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not farther describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of . . . as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death (Machen 99).

Her body’s transformation through all of these stages is striking, but the last stage of her body taking on the form of the satyr is perhaps the most disruptive. Here she crosses the boundaries most clearly between natural and supernatural, and even the boundaries between father and daughter are crossed. This “unspeakable shape” under the disguise of a lady leads to one of the most intense depictions of breaking of boundaries. Dr. Matheson’s rational scientific jargon fails to accurately contextualize what he sees, and he often refuses to describe what he saw in detail. Helen’s body defies rationality and seems to be made of pure abyss, everything and nothing at once, which makes her body the source of the horror of the novella.

The image of Helen Vaughan dying with the cord around her “blackened face” harkens back to the children’s rhyme quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The death of Cotton as a historical event and the death of Helen Vaughan as a literary event seem to mark shifts in attitudes about the essentialist “nature” of women and bodies. They demonstrate the anxieties produced by a changing society that seeks above all else to progress, not regress. The mystery of the abyss of Helen cannot be solved or deciphered, thus reiterating that Victorian science, medicine, and burgeoning interest in the depths of the mind cannot solve all the mysteries of life. A goal to extract and remove all those who do not fit the ideal or preconceived notions of boundaries runs through the interpretations and retellings of the lives and deaths of both Cotton and Vaughan, proving the impossibility of determining normalcy. The men who encounter Helen are forever themselves affected by her, their minds completely altered by the encounter with such a transformative female body capable of such horrors. The events and challenges of turn of the century life created more questions than answers. The natural world was just as veiled as the abyss that Helen represented. Helen, to them, is an example of what could happen if the culture, if humanity, continued to degenerate. She encompasses all nature, yet she is a perversion of the socially constructed knowledge of female nature. Through her transformative and transgressive body, Helen Vaughan crosses almost all of the boundaries any of these transformative women could cross.

Chapter 5

Lasting Impressions: Female Monsters as Figures of Resilience

The female transformative or monstrous characters are problematic figures and antagonists in the Gothic works that feature such women. In twenty-first century scholarship, female monsters might be more easily perceived as heroines rather than the villain as she is portrayed in the texts of the nineteenth century. These female monsters within the Gothic texts reveal the nineteenth century British mainstream culture's weaknesses and fears, presenting the anxieties for all to see and making the normative characters tremble at their sight. The female monsters' transformative and transgressive bodies reveal the cultural anxieties and subvert the mainstream stereotypes of the nature of women's bodies.

Depending on the mainstream thought and subcultural undercurrents, women were placed into strict binaries that seemed to clearly delineate the boundaries between proper and improper, masculine and feminine, ideology and reality, etc. Appropriate roles and behavior for women were defined and perpetuated by the culture's institutions—science, religion, literature, and education. Women had an innate nature because of their sex, they thought, but if one thing went awry (a surprise vampire guest perhaps) then a woman would revert, degenerate back into another aspect of her dual nature, an animalistic, lustful, deceitful being that seemed so unlike a “natural” woman. Auerbach writes, “It may not be surprising that female demons bear an eerie resemblance to their angelic counterparts, though characteristics that are suggestively implicit in the angel come to the fore in the demon” (*Woman* 75). The female monsters (referred to as demons in Auerbach's work) incite fear because they seem different from the angels who live so close to them and earn their affection, and yet they are, to the observers in the works, the potential wickedness women embodied. Their boundary

crossing makes them difficult to recognize as monstrous often until it is too late, producing a neurosis or paranoia in other characters and readers that might lead them to suspect any woman might become monstrous.

Social binaries placed women within restrictive boundaries that were difficult to overcome. Butler writes, “These excluded sites come to bound the ‘human’ as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation” (*Bodies* 8). The female monsters on the boundaries of existence do not just provide a few shivers of disgust from another character, but act as figures that break (unconsciously or consciously) these boundaries that threaten to cause a revision in concepts of humanity and femininity. The female monster, because of her transformative and transgressive aspects, could transcend these restrictions and remain unpredictable, demonstrating that the essentialist notions of a female nature or a female body were fallible. Becker writes that the physical and behavioral “gothic excesses” of such transformative and transgressive women “resist le propre in terms of femininity and to disrupt the ‘proper’ plots for heroines, thus exposing their constructing and appropriating ideology” (172). This disruption of “proper plots” for other female characters or even for the monsters’ own original trajectory allows writers to argue about the introduction of evil to goodness, ugliness to purity, and what can happen if women are not protected. However, the monster subverts this depiction of the disruption and shows that the patriarchal protection and common ideologies are faulty and weak. They also reveal the possibility that a woman can divert the goals of masculine forces (those that often involve women). Here we see the mermaid, in concert with violent feminized nature, destroying ships of men even after her own body and life were disrupted by her transformation. Carmilla is welcomed into a home and encouraged

to become a companion for a young woman, but no one realizes that beyond her grace and beauty is a vampire who slowly causes Laura's potentially proper future to deteriorate. Lucy's own happy future is thwarted when she encounters the vampiric disease, and her body transforms from angel to demon before the eyes of the men who swear to love and protect her. With her secrets and seductions, Helen Vaughan's transformative revelation at her death exposes the unknowability of the body and the futile efforts to determine a shared feminine nature. She resists all logical classification and crosses boundaries unimaginable to the witnesses.

Another pattern amongst these novels arises when looking at the deaths of three of the female monsters and the one who lives on. Narrated by the voices of others, the transgressive existences of Carmilla, Lucy, and Helen Vaughan are examined closely by authoritative experts and observers; they have no voice of their own from within their transformative bodies that narrates their own experience directly. Lucy only writes of the fear and anxiety she feels as she transforms, and most of Carmilla's words are outbursts or whispers of passion directed at vamping Laura or disguising herself. Helen never communicates a word that the reader intercepts.

Female monsters in the Gothic genre are often figures such as the double, the femme fatale, or the source of mysterious occurrences that plague the other characters. Although they do contribute to these literary purposes, the female monsters have a history that extends much further back and beyond the literary explosion in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While many of the old legends and myths share characteristics of the female monster with later literature, the Gothic provides a place to explore the female monster and her body in a way that extends beyond the textual problem of the monster and her

interactions with other characters. Because of the Gothic's use of doubling, mirroring, aberrant sexuality, queer bodies, death, disease, repulsion and attraction, and pain and pleasure, the female monster becomes not just a supporting character or antagonist, but a character that is representative of fear and anxiety. Many feminist and queer theory scholars see the female monster as a liberator, a debunker of old sexist and phobic ideologies. Wisker writes, "Figures of horror, of the abject, are ideally placed to be reimagined and rescripted as positive celebrations of otherness, utilizing the strategies of the queer Gothic to do so" (124). Her transformative and transgressive body provides the site for much of the reclaiming of otherness. Auerbach writes, "It may be time for feminists to circle back to those 'images' of angels and demons, nuns and whores, whom it seemed so easy and so liberating to kill, in order to retrieve a less tangible, but also less restricting, facet of woman's history than the traditional social sciences can encompass" (*Woman* 3). While written history often forgets women or offers only a singular view, the Gothic offers a place where readers can dig to find fragments of social and cultural history.

Gilbert and Gubar write, "As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed" (34). Although the majority of the monsters in this thesis end up being destroyed by a patriarchal group, snuffing out the flames of a transformative female body, somehow the monstrous woman seems to last at least in the memories and nightmares of the other characters. The psychological and physical effects of the female monster remain. This fulfills Cohen's second thesis: "The monster always escapes" (5). While the female monster often does not escape death, she does escape complete oblivion from culture. Indeed, as Cohen asserts, the monster may die, but he or she reappears later in another text, always shifting throughout time and culture (5). Even though

as the Other, the female monster may be physically slaughtered, bringing the society in the literature back to order, she still remains. The mermaid proclaims, “Thro’ time’s long ages I shall wait / To lead the victims to their fate” (VII. 67-68). Even as the last stanza of Bannerman’s poem ends, the mermaid tells her audience that she is still there. Unlike the mermaid narrator, Carmilla is destroyed, yet the novella *Carmilla* ends with the knowledge that this encounter with Carmilla has affected the rest of Laura’s life. Even as Laura ends her narrative to her audience, she acknowledges at the end that the memory of her friend still haunts her even after they are separated by death. She writes:

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 (Le Fanu 148).

These last few sentences prove the extent of the brief events’ effects on Laura even after the material body of Carmilla is destroyed and the men easily theorize her case and end it there. It is the unity and relationship the young women had that bound them, even in the event of one’s death. Auerbach writes, “Carmilla does live in Laura’s life at the end” and suggests that “Laura’s memories restore Carmilla’s physical life” (*Our Vampires* 47). Carmilla’s proclamation ““I live in you; and you would die for me. I love you so”” comes true, and the two young women become one, bound in death as in life (Le Fanu 112). As the reader learns in the “Prologue,” Laura dies after writing her narrative, consumed with the disease. This demonstrates the resiliency of the female monster. Helen Vaughan haunts men’s minds after she shows them whatever she shows them, and even drawings of her face, found hidden away, strike the viewer with a lasting repulsion and discomfort that seems to affect them permanently. Although Helen, like the female vampires, is killed, her strange case and the

negative feelings she leaves on people and places hang in the air like a musty scent of an old, closed-up house. Therefore, her lasting influence allows this characteristic of the female monster to comment on the resiliency of the Other. The culture will always have Others to fear and avoid, but they “shift” throughout time and culture, continuing to provide a place to discuss Otherness and cultural anxieties.

Perhaps this resiliency is what allows readers to interpret the female monsters as heroines. If women are the Other, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, and are essentially made to die (or be sacrificed for the greater good as some examples may serve to suggest), the woman who crosses the boundaries built by a patriarchal culture prevails. “The imaginative association of women with monstrosity, or with that which is conscious but not human,” Auerbach writes, “is both a stigma . . . and a celebration of female powers of metamorphosis” (*Woman* 65). The stigma has existed for centuries, and while the female monster presents a perception of women as horrible, abject, disgusting, and against nature, the female monster also attracts. Modern readers are certainly attracted by her resilience.

Gothic literature is one of the few discourses that allow this interpretation to subvert gender construction and ideologies of “natural” femininity. Becker writes, “. . . as subject-in-relation with a gothic figure like ‘monstrous-feminine’ it posits a radical attack on the constraints of ‘Woman’: the feminine ideal in a specific cultural context” (41). Becker states that this occurs because, even from the anti-realist point of the view the Gothic invokes, the Gothic has a relationship to the female experience (21). Indeed, during the nineteenth century, gender stereotypes placed women into tight boundaries that seemed inescapable, but the reality of female existence was not so clear. Butler writes, “Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows

that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred” (*Undoing Gender* 3). The female monster breaks these boundaries and resists normativity. In the texts covered in this thesis, boundaries are revealed to be unstable and often more difficult to define.

As outrageous and supernatural as these four female monsters can seem, it is helpful to study their transformative bodies and boundary crossing in order to show how the Gothic of the nineteenth century can embody various contemporary attitudes about women and the anxieties that have developed through the fast-developing culture. The female monsters may pull the other characters and the readers into the dark depths of their transformative existences, but they are irresistible and impossible to destroy completely. The female monster will always be a present figure in literature. Praz writes, “It is not simply a case of convention and literary fashion: literature, even in its most artificial forms, reflects to some extent aspects of contemporary life” (216). The female monster still lives on, having survived through the nineteenth century, exposing the deepest and darkest fears and anxieties of our society.

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