The Gothic Novel’s Othering of the Female

A study of Gothic literature reveals an intense fascination with defining the other; the other is defined in terms of racial markings, religious descriptions, but perhaps is mostly discussed in terms of identifying and categorizing the female other. The presentation of the female other within works of Gothic literature can be examined to reveal the anxieties of both Victorian and modern society. The vampire, a staple “monster” of the Gothic narrative, is used as a narrative tool to define female sexuality and in turn help to define what appears to be an allusive member of society: the female herself. By examining LeFanu’s *Carmilla*, Stoker’s *Dracula*, and a popular modern day rendition of the vampire narrative, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, it becomes clear the female is literature’s most dangerous “other,” the ultimate transgressor. The most serious threat to patriarchy comes not from the foreign other, a necessary by-product of imperialistic ambition, but from within; female sexuality is therefore used within the vampire narrative to mark the real monster of the novel: the female who refuses to allow herself to be controlled and defined by patriarchy.

While examining the construction of female identity within Gothic narratives it is important to deconstruct the work in terms of its discourse. Several questions must be addressed including: Who creates female identity in the Gothic novel? Who tells the female’s story? How does the female transgress social boundaries? Why is the
exploration of female sexuality essential to the plot of a Gothic novel despite setting, time period, and historical context? These questions can be answered by defining the other within the Gothic novel. In the article, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States,” Sharon Winnubst discusses Lacan and Hegel’s definition of the other. According to Lacan and Hegel defining the other, marking difference, is used to define the self: “For Hegel, the subject craves the recognition of another subject to affirm his—and for Hegel and Lacan, it is always ‘his’—place in the world as a subject who is seen, not an object who is looked upon (3). If patriarchy cannot mark the other their own identity is proved to be unstable, an unreliable construction. Within vampire narratives, the creature, an undeniable representation of humanity, is quickly labeled as the representation of the other within the story. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* has often been discussed in terms of its expression of Victorian fears concerning interactions with the racial other as a result from imperialistic ventures connected to the concept of empire building; but what is more interesting is the relationships between monster and victims. An examination of *Carmilla*, *Dracula*, and *Twilight* reveals it is not an easy task to define who is the villain and who is the victim, or who is the colonizer and who is the colonized subject. A closer inspection of these novels reveals the true fear showcased within the story is both Victorian and modern society’s fear of female authority and the weakening of patriarchal constructed gender roles. Each of these novels focuses on intense relationships between the easily recognizable transgressor (the vampire) and the less easily marked transgressor (the female). It is because the female’s identity is considerably more difficult to fix that the female becomes the real concern of the Gothic narrative.
LeFanu’s *Carmilla* presents, much like *Dracula*, the story of a vampire who maintains an unsettling relationship with a female, a relationship in which the “victim” is both drawn and repulsed by the supernatural creature. It is this paradoxical relationship that sheds light on the vampire narrative’s preoccupation with female authority. Female authority in *Carmilla* is both advanced and controlled by the narrative’s allusions to sexuality in connection to the female characters. One of the most interesting aspects of the story is that Carmilla, a female vampire, appears to be particularly drawn to young women. Female relationships are thus indicated to be a central aspect of the story. In the article, “‘The Precautions of Nervous People Are Infectious’: Sheridan le Fanu's Symptomatic Gothic,” critic Helen Stoddart claims: “Carmilla’s particular distinction is that, unlike Dracula, she is exclusively drawn to members of her own sex, thus sharpening her threat to the nuclear family, so central to the progress of the bourgriousse as a class” (28). Stoddart fails to look beyond the typical and abundant claims that vampire novels are explorations of anxieties between the socio-economic classes, refusing to acknowledge Carmilla’s threat to the nuclear family is not merely about persevering the family unit as a representational tool of a certain class, but rather Carmilla’s real danger is her ability to cross gender boundaries. It is essential to examine Carmilla’s ability to often fool the male characters of the story in order to pursue her wants and needs. Carmilla is a character who asserts her own authority and who is allowed to do so for a great deal of the narrative without much trouble.

Many of the scenes between Carmilla and the object of her desire, Laura, often play out as a strange mirroring of traditional courting between a man and a woman. Their relationship is extremely physical and has been cited by many critics are being lesbian in
nature. Laura describes one such physical scene as follows: “It was like the ardor of a 
lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she
drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would
whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever’” (16). Carmilla’s sexuality both repulses and entrances Laura; it is Carmilla’s sexuality,
and her ownership and understanding of it, which allows Carmilla power. Carmilla has
shed off the traditional role of the meek, submissive, de-sexualized woman. Carmilla
portrays throughout the story a masculine, sexualized nature, a presentation of sexuality
that allows her to be the seducer instead of the seduced. Shortly after this encounter,
Laura is able to recognize this transgression of gender roles: “Was she, notwithstanding
her mother’s volunteered denial, subject to brief visitations of insanity; or was there here
a disguise of romance? I had read in old storybooks of such things. What if a boyish lover
had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with
the assistance of a clever old adventuress” (16). Laura’s question reveals awareness that
Carmilla’s overtly sexual behaviors are contradictory to traditional gender roles. A closer
inspection of Carmilla’s speech to Laura reflects her desire that Laura realizes that she is
just like Carmilla, “…you are I are one forever” (16). This is a subtle attempt at
acknowledging Carmilla’s overtly sexual behavior; the female’s greatest threat to
patriarchy is present within an ideal female character such as Laura. This is the true
anxiety of the text.

While it becomes obvious, as seen through the eventual demise of Carmilla, that
sexuality in connection with female identity is being discussed in accordance to questions
of what is acceptable behavior and what is not acceptable according to patriarchy, another
question still is not answered: why choose a vampire tale to explore this idea? According to the article “Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire” males and females were not defined as separate sexes until the 17th century. Catherine Belsey connects this to the rise of the popularity of Gothic narratives focused on vampires: “Vampire sexuality immediately deconstructs this newly established opposition: both male and female vampires penetrate their victims, but only after they have been penetrated by another vampire…” (697). The vampire narrative therefore alludes that sexual identities, the male seducer and the seduced female, are pure artifice. Vampires then become fictional representations of the repressed and all that is contradictory about society and human nature.

The vampire is an easy to mark villain within the Gothic narrative because they have come to represent both repression and transgression: “They are threatening, we are invited to understand, however seductive they may also be, not least because they liberate an unbridled and voracious eroticism, especially in women, whose feelings ought to be moral, not sexual” (Belsey 699). The real villains of Gothic vampire narratives such as *Carmilla* are not the vampires but what is repressed within the text itself: female sexuality. The reader must look to who is being victimized to discover who or what the novel is really trying suppress. In the end, Carmilla is destroyed by men. Her destruction is both brutal and focused on the body of the female vampire, but it is Laura who is the threat. Laura represents the female who must be protected, a female who must be saved by the men around her. Laura flirts with acknowledging her own sexuality. Her vampire-esque encounters with Carmilla are described with both pleasure and horror:
Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion… (29)

It is her ambiguous reactions to these encounters that represent the threat of female sexuality within the text. Female sexuality equates female identity as the female is often only defined by her sexual difference, a deformed man lacking a penis. If female sexuality cannot be controlled then construction of female identity by patriarchy can no longer be read. This is why Laura often has a difficult time reading the gender of Carmilla: “Except in these brief periods of excitement her ways were girlish; and there was always a languor about her, quite with a masculine system in a state of health” (16). Carmilla is “girl-ish” and yet Laura is drawn to her.

The vampire narrative becomes an exploration of a culture’s anxieties; but as interesting as these narratives are the transgressor is almost always eventually destroyed or put back in their proper place within the hierarchy of patriarchy. Critic Shannon Winnubst acknowledges the Gothic novel’s ability to express what she labels as the “collective nightmare” of society:

This collective nightmare performs some of our worst cultural anxieties—about desire, fear, and aggression; about gender, sexuality, and race; about history, bodies, and violence. It sets the scene of gender and race as the scene of sex and
violence, instilling fear in all gendered and raced (that is, all ‘marked’) bodies. It is a myth that will not stop haunting us, even as we prove its mythical status (2).

While Carmilla’s vampire status marks her as mythic, something outside the realm of possibility, her sexuality, and her ability to awaken a sense of sexuality in Laura, is the real threat. In the end, Carmilla is hunted and killed by men, protectors of patriarchy. It is the white male who must recognize the creature’s evil and thwart it. It is no coincidence that even the story Carmilla is presented to the reader through a male entity. LeFanu’s story uses the conventional Victorian practice of using a framing device to present his Gothic tale. The reader is distanced from the female voice and it is only the male voice, present in the frame narrative, which allows the reader to hear Laura’s story. Laura’s credibility as a narrator can only be accepted if verified by Doctor Hesselius. While female sexuality, and thus female authority and identity, are allowed a space within the text to cross gender boundaries, they are, in the end, put back into their place. One of Laura’s final statements regarding her experiences with Carmilla best expresses the Gothic narrative’s inspection of the dual nature of women: “….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....” (55).

Women have the ability to possess and exhibit both of these identities if not maintained and controlled by patriarchy.

Much like LeFanu’s Carmilla, Bram Stoker’s Dracula uses the mythic vampire to evaluate the role of women in Victorian society, paying particular attention to the connection between female sexuality and female identity. Within Stoker’s narrative, there are a variety of what may be called “victims.” A closer look at these victims and the way
Dracula himself is marked will reveal the story’s anxiety. While LeFanu’s vampire tale focuses on a female hunter, Stoker’s focuses on vampires of both genders. Within Stoker’s catalogue of vampire representations he plays with the idea of creating identity using sexual descriptions and behaviors. Dracula, as well as his three female companions, are each given both feminine and masculine sexually based characteristics. These contradictory sets of descriptors allude that identity, as constructed through one’s sexuality, is not stable. In the article, “Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia,” critic Judith E. Johnson writes: “One of the tropes by which the revolt subtext manifests itself is in a heightened need for symmetry. Dracula has three wives who attempt to victimize Harker. To counter this, Lucy has three suitors who attempt to defend her from the Count” (77). Johnson’s quote can be connected to this idea in several ways. Johnson’s “revolt subtext,” or the narrative’s commentary on the dangers of female sexuality, can be seen through the power awarded to Dracula’s three wives and their overtly sexualized attack on Harker: “The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness, which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal….I closed my eyes in languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart” (Stoker 44). The wives’ power over Harker is directly connected to their sexuality. Female sexuality and female agency and therefore connected. A female who expresses her sexuality is therefore a threat to patriarchy. Johnson’s allusion to Lucy’s three suitors in connection with Dracula’s three wives emphasizes this idea. Lucy, while certainly no vampire at the time, openly flirts and plays with the affections of three men. While this hardly seems the same as the female vampires’ treatment of Harker, it is still an assertion of sexual power. The
female vampires are mythic characters whose transgressions are larger than life; their status as an other is easy to identify. Lucy’s transgressions, based in Victorian sensibilities, are harder to distinguish. It is no coincidence that Lucy, not Mina, turns into a vampire who must be eventually killed by the very men she attempted to control.

Stoker’s *Dracula*, like LeFanu’s *Carmilla*, asserts it is up to patriarchy to control female sexuality and as a result female agency. In the article, “A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of Dracula,” John Allen Stevenson analyzes Mina’s speech to Harker asking him to kill her if she turns into a vampire. Within this speech Mina says: “Think, dear, that there have been times when brave men have killed their wives and womenkind, to keep them from falling into the hands of the enemy….It is men’s duty towards those whom they love…” (351). Mina’s speech places the responsibility of protecting the female in society on patriarchy. Concerning this speech, Stevenson asserts that Mina is not talking about protection from a racial or foreign other, but protection from her own desires: “The problem is one of loyalty: the danger is not that she will be captured but that she will go willingly” (1). Once again, the true transgressor of the Gothic narrative is not the mythic creature, but the creature’s intended victim. The real fear is not that Mina is being seduced by Dracula, but the fear is that, like Lucy, perhaps she desires it.

During the writing of *Dracula*, the Victorian period was concerned with the rise of the New Woman. While the New Woman was often described as a female interested in her own financial affairs and education, critic Carol A. Snejf claims the classification of the New Woman had more to do with sex: “When it came to sex the New Woman was more frank and open than her predecessors. She felt free to initiate sexual relationships,
to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as conception and venereal disease” (35). Mina’s presence in the novel signifies Stoker’s struggle with the New Woman. This struggle is not a strict condemnation of the New Woman, but neither is it fully supportive of her position in Victorian society. As a result, Mina exhibits many of the qualities of the New Woman, but through her experiences with the vampires the reader learns which aspects of the New Woman Stoker supported and which aspects of the New Woman he condemned. In the article, “‘Dracula’: Stoker’s Response to the New Woman,” Snef claims: “Mina rejects both the forwardness and the sexual openness of the New Woman writers” (36). How then can Mina be seen as a danger to patriarchy? Mina is a warning. Even a female with obvious intellect, as seen through Mina’s effective assistance to the men while hunting Dracula, can become victim to her own sexuality. Female sexuality that goes unchecked can cause the female to regress. Mina’s ultimate moment of weakness comes when she shares blood with Dracula: “Her white night dress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare breast which was shown by his torn open dress” (300). Unprotected by her male counterparts, Mina becomes victim to Dracula’s bloodlust. Even the New Woman must have some male guidance. Snef follows this belief, concluding:

Familiar with the feminist movement and apparently supportive of women’s struggle for professional equality, he creates women characters who are the intellectual equals of the men in his novels; however, he seems to have drawn the line at sexual equality, and he has his heroines choose the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood instead of careers (38).
While Stoker’s *Dracula* appears to be a step in the right direction in comparison to LeFanu’s *Carmilla*, it is important to note difference between male and female is still connected to sexuality.

Looking at Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* will reveal an obvious fascination with the ways society attempts to mark the other. LeFanu’s vampire, Carmilla, easily fit within society. The general tells the story of how he was entranced by Carmilla who so easily played the role of the harmless, sympathetic young female: “I liked her more and more every minute. Her gossip without being ill-natured, was extremely diverting to me, who had been so long out of the great world. I thought what life she would give to our sometimes lonely evenings at home” (44). While Carmilla’s status as an other goes virtually unrecognized for a great portion of the story, in the end, Carmilla is marked and identified by Van Helsing. While Carmilla’s often-ambiguous status might merely be a technique used to increase the suspense within LeFanu’s Gothic tale, it might also reveal certain ideologies concerning women’s place in society. It was difficult in Victorian society to know if the wives and daughters were truly as pure and innocent as they claimed. Women had within them an inherent sexual desire that must be controlled. In comparison to LeFanu’s treatment of the other, Stoker’s marking of the other is easier to trace. Stevenson writes:

> An idea like race helps us to grapple with human otherness—the fact that we do not all look alike or believe alike or act alike. Dracula is, above all, strange to those he encounters—strange in his habits, strange in his appearance, strange in his physiology. At one point, Van Helsing calls him ‘the other’ (297), and the
competition for women in the novel reflects a conflict between groups that define themselves as foreign to the other (3).

Stevenson’s assertion that Dracula symbolizes the foreign other has been discussed by many critics, but what is more interesting is Stevenson’s statement that the men compete for the women. Whoever controls the women, controls society. Even Mina is marked as an other within the narrative. After sharing blood with Dracula, Mina is marked when a wafer is placed on her head which burns its print into her forehead: “Unclean! Unclean! Even the almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the judgment day” (Stoker 314). Mina is physically marked within the narrative as an other; someone who has step outside of what is acceptable in Victorian society.

Mina’s salvation is once again the key indicator to the narrative’s discourse on the place of female sexuality, and as a result female identity, in Victorian society. How can Mina be saved? Mina is saved by the men around her; she is saved by patriarchy. When Lucy needs a blood transfusion, Van Helsing refuses to allow the other women in the house to donate blood: “I fear to trust those women, even if they would have the courage to submit” (162). One reading of this scene is Van Helsing mistrusts the women because they are of a lower class; they are maids. But another reading suggests women are unable to save Lucy because she is a woman herself. Lucy needs Van Helsing, her three suitors, and Mr. Harker to save her soul because her blood has been too tainted to save her life. These men must answer Dracula’s haunting threat, a threat that strikes at the very heart of the Victorian home: “My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others
shall yet be mine—my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed” (325). If the female is the heart of the Victorian household, what happens when the arrival of the New Woman upsets that balance? In the end, Mina accepts her role as mother and is protected from Dracula. She becomes a symbol for Stoker’s image of the New Woman: she is a woman who is intelligent and useful but eventually settles into the role of wife and mother, disregarding the New Woman’s radical ideas concerning sexuality. As Van Helsing summarizes, Mina is proof the men were successful: “We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us! This boy some day will know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care; later he will understand how some men so loved her, that they did dare much for her sake” (400). It is not the death of Dracula that proves their cause worthy but the salvation of Mina.

A comparison between vampire tales written in the Victorian period and modern day vampire tales produces some significant changes, as well as reinforcement of certain ideologies belonging to the Victorian period in regards to the connection between female sexuality, female identity, and the other in Gothic literature. A modern day reworking of the vampire tale, Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight attempts to define who is the other in today’s culture. One of the most important differences when comparing this work to LeFanu’s Carmilla and Stoker’s Dracula is Twilight is written by a female author. In fact, the past thirty years has seen a plethora of vampire narratives written by female authors. In the article, “Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia?” Judith E. Johnson examines the current popular trend of women authors taking on the vampire narrative: “If Jung is correct, then the popular mythologies of contemporary genre fiction
may tell us of what society dreams. Of what does our society dream when women write vampires? Does She, the eternal Woman, come boiling up from Her underground coffin, which is our group unconsciousness, in which she has remained hidden away…. “(1).

While Johnson’s article focuses mainly on vampire narratives that, like Carmilla, focus on female vampires, her essay can be used to discuss female reactions to the vampire story. Twilight, a recent popular culture phenomenon, has a primarily female fan base. What attracts female readers to this story? Concerning the female reader’s reaction to the vampire, Johnson writes: “The abuse of power for which the vampire is a metaphor thus includes abuse of women both as property and as tools in men’s efforts to control and abuse other men…. Furthermore, the vampire story suggests that this control of one sex by the other for no other reason other than sex provokes terror in both sexes” (76).

Interestingly enough, Meyer’s Twilight presents vampires who protect, not corrupt, the sexuality of the narrative’s female protagonist. Twilight represents a reconstruction of the vampire that allows both sympathy and understanding. Is this because female writers, others in their own sense, can relate to being marked by patriarchy? There is an intense need in modern vampire narratives to understand the vampire suggesting that today’s culture is more open about its understanding of marking other-ness in society.

Meyer’s Twilight portrays Edward Cullen, vampire, as not only the love interest of the novel but also as protector. While Meyer continues the modern trend of attempting to understand the other, her novel reinforces many of the beliefs connected to the sexual politics of the Victorian period. Edward saves Bella, the female protagonist, from getting raped. He becomes the protector of her vulnerable sexuality, much as the male characters in both Carmilla and Dracula attempt to protect the sexuality of their women. When
Edward is asked why he does not hunt humans, he responds: “I don’t want to be a monster” (187). When Bella questions Edward about the possibility of sex, he denies his longing for her in an attempt to keep her safe: “If I was too hasty….if for one second I wasn’t paying attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don’t realize how incredibly breakable you are. I can never afford to lose any kind of control when I’m with you” (310). Sex is presented as dangerous if not controlled. Bella, like Mina, is presented as both intelligent and able to think for herself; she is no typical damsel in distress who cowers in the background. She is well read, smart, and willing to speak up if she disagrees. Yet, like Mina, Bella’s sexuality must be kept in checked by her male counterpart, her century old, virgin vampire boyfriend.

What does this say about the progression of the other in the Gothic narrative and its connection to female identity? Meyer’s work shows a closer alignment between the status of the other and the female. Edward is able to mainstream into society, hiding his other-ness (the fact that he is a vampire) from all but Bella. Perhaps in a world of political correctness, the other has become increasingly difficult to mark. Bella and Edward do not have sex until after they are married. Is this a harkening back to Victorian values of chastity and virtue or a bold choice in a culture that does not shed away from sex before marriage, a culture that trades sexuality like stock in a flashy, mass media world? Regardless of the novel’s intent, the fact that the other has come to protect the female’s sexuality, and not merely patriarchy, is something to note. In conclusion, female sexuality, virtue, and virginity still appear to be something valued in society and within the Gothic narrative. What has changed is the Gothic novel’s understanding of what is it
to be a monster; it has become increasingly difficult to draw the line between monstrosity and humanity. The Other has become difficult to mark suggesting a movement towards understanding between all different types. Perhaps this can only happen first in the Gothic narrative, a genre that allows the blurring between reality and fantasy.