WHAT WILL NOT BE NAMED: THE GIRL AND THE OTHER IN CARMILLA AND ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

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ABSTRACT

Gothic figures and places have always existed in literature, at times menacing and at times seeming to simply reflect our own human identities and societies. Through signification, Victorian literature enables novel readers to easily identify when and how the Gothic presents a threat to the protagonist. A narrator’s verbal condemnation of a subject would likely indicate its undesirability; on the other hand, silence may suggest the suppression of an improper desire for that subject. Such identification and recognition on part of the reader take place in the reading process. But the act of reading is infused with complexities when the narrator chooses to manipulate language in the performance of narration. This thesis focuses on two Victorian texts which interlace issues of narrative, language, knowledge and self-identity. In Carmilla, Sheridan le Fanu presents a girl protagonist who opens up gaps and spaces for interpretation in the narrative by means of intentionally withheld knowledge. Accordingly, this type of chosen silence inserts different layers of meaning to the “unspeakable.” In Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll’s Alice makes use of nonsensical language, exploring the potential of her identity and sexuality. These girl protagonists throw into question concepts of vampirism, victimization, purity, and innocence. And they never say more, perhaps, than when they are ever-present and silent.
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Many thanks,
Danbee Moon
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I Carmilla: Narrative Gaps and Telling Silences .......................................................... 9

Chapter II Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: Speaking in Wonderland ............................. 40

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................................................... 58

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................................................ 61
INTRODUCTION

“Ah father, how willingly would I unveil to you my heart! How willingly would I declare the secret which bows me down with its weight! But oh! I fear, I fear –”

“What, my son?”

“That you should abhor me for my weakness; that the reward of my confidence should be the loss of your esteem. . . . Father!” continued he, throwing himself at the Friar’s feet, and pressing his hand to his lips with eagerness, while agitation for a moment choked his voice; “father!” continued he in faltering accents, “I am a woman!”

_The Monk_ (1796)

The agitating secret that Matilda harbors in Matthew Lewis’ _The Monk_ is her gender. As a young “male,” she is esteemed and beloved; as a young woman, she becomes dangerous, attractive, and immensely problematic. Because she feels sexual desire, she, albeit briefly, condemns herself. But because that desire is directed towards a male figure, Matilda’s shortcomings can be characterized as typical female “weakness,” for it is not unusual to read of a woman weeping for a male lover. Thus, when her desire is reciprocated by Ambrosio, whether Matilda is demon or human, we can be assured that the emotion between the two characters is heterosexual and related to power dynamics; Matilda seeks to destroy him, not to create in him a being like herself. Bram Stoker’s _Dracula_ is even more dangerous because he represents a sexual threat to both Jonathan and Mina Harker; moreover, he seeks to make a bride out of Mina, who connects with him to the degree that she can sense his whereabouts. Yet, this connection is less threatening because Dracula is clearly a male with “brides,” and he at one point force-feeds Mina in a rape-like scene. Mina is repelled by Dracula; Sheridan le Fanu’s _Laura_ is strongly attracted to Carmilla, even as she is repelled by her. Carmilla is no Dracula. Despite her strange habits, she is clearly a lovely young girl who does not rape, but nourishes Laura. More threateningly,
both are illustrated not as full-grown woman, but as young Victorian girls who should be pure and Christian.

That is not to say that desire between females should denote a misdirected or improper desire. As Sharon Marcus describes in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, homosocial sentiment and intimacy were common for women of the Victorian era, as part of a consumer culture that allowed women to participate in intimate relationships that were even erotic or sexual at times. Female friendship allowed women to enjoy the privilege and opportunity “to display affection and experience pleasurable physical contact outside marriage without any loss of respectability” (57). Nonetheless, during the Victorian period, the severity of obscenity laws and Victorian morality rendered it impossible for British writers to write about lesbian sexuality, much less same-sex desire between young girls. Thus, the vehicle of the vampire allowed le Fanu to write about sex that involves penetration but not genitals. Like that of Matilda’s, Carmilla’s secret about her true identity is what may potentially present her as dangerous. But the true danger occurs in this text when Carmilla’s desire is reciprocated by Laura, in whom Carmilla seeks to create a being like herself. This is why the novel lays out clearly that Carmilla must be destroyed, and she is. Characters who hold authority in the text are just as preoccupied with maintaining Laura’s “innocence” as they are with staking the vampire. Innocence, in this sense, relates to the inability to recognize, or lack of forbidden sexual knowledge. The text hinges greatly on the question as to how much Laura recognizes Carmilla for what she really is, and whether that affects the dynamics of their relations.

Similarly, it is questionable as to how “innocent” and powerless Alice is in Wonderland. Alice repeatedly tries and fails to create a sense of logic in Wonderland, but in the process, she
becomes affiliated more and more with the creatures who frustrate her. Alice, in the entirety of her dream, does not encounter one human child like herself. Instead, she encounters and criticizes characters who, to her eyes, appear to lack logic. But in fact, as she comes to realize that her prim Victorian lessons and manners matter little, she herself increasingly resembles the Wonderland creatures, growing cannibalistic, violent, and speaking in the same nonsensical language. Throughout Wonderland, Alice is forced to question who she is, attempting to reason her way out, only to conclude that she herself lacks an unchanging logic or identity. In this sense, the narrator suggests that perhaps it is natural for Alice to find it difficult to distinguish between a child and a pig. In this thesis, I look at relations between a girl heroine and nonhuman characters that destabilize boundaries of identity in Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Throughout my thesis, I refer to nonhuman characters as the Other. In these two texts, queered narrative spaces suggest deviant desires to be natural from the perspective of the protagonist. I focus on language and silences in particular, because they depict the narrator’s refusal to name, condemn, or limit desire that opens up possibilities of identity and inherent otherness that are rejected by Victorian society and the text’s authoritative characters.

Unframed, written by a male, and exploring the emotions of two young girls, *Carmilla* is difficult to place within the Gothic genre, although its textual components seem to readily point it in that direction. To male characters of the text, the vampire is a frightening figure. But the phenomenon of the vampire is explained away by experts, and Carmilla’s attraction towards the girl is quickly stripped of its threatening nature by being categorized as normative vampire courtship behavior. The explanation of the vampire seems to align the text with the female
Gothic in part; moreover, the two protagonists are both female. Stemming from Ann Radcliffe, who essentially served as a guide for the female Gothic and gave the genre a name, through the works of writers including Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë emerged female desire and thrilling dangers characterized by secret passages, dark forests and Gothic castles. Female protagonists were beset with dangers that women readers happily shuddered to read and Jane Austen wittily parodied in *Northanger Abbey*. As female protagonists like Jane Eyre and Emily St Aubert learn that their superstitious terrors can be explained by natural causes, the reader, too, may mature in understanding that the heroine’s state of being female and, thus, extremely sensitive and imaginative is perhaps her greatest predicament of all. This problem is solved – or hastily botched – through a conclusive, final-sounding marriage plot in *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and all of Austen’s novels.

But both *Carmilla* and *Alice* reject the notion of narrative closure. Fittingly, both texts are but half-framed. Laura is not married to General Spielsdorf, or any male character for that matter, and the talkative Alice is not given any lines outside of Wonderland except her exclamation of “Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!” (88). In *Carmilla*, Dr. Hesselius sets up a scientific beginning which is abandoned by an ending which does not end with a scientific note by a male character but with Carmilla’s light step echoing by the drawing-room door. In *Alice*, we begin reading by slipping into Alice’s dream with her, waking up to it with Alice’s sister’s words of supposed closure. Alice does not mature or reconcile with the adult world by the time her dream ends, but her sister nevertheless imagines Alice as a mother with children. However, even this ending is tricky as her sister slips into a reverie of Wonderland, as if it is a naturally shared dream. D.A. Miller compellingly states in *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in*
the Traditional Novel that the narratable features of the text oppose closure. He argues that “the narratable is stronger than the closure to which it is opposed in an apparent binarity. For the narratable is the very evidence of the narrative text, while closure (as, precisely, the nonnarratable) is only the sign that this text is over” (266). Indeed, neither text participates in what Miller finds to be the problem of narrative closure, in which “the otherness of closure suggests one of the unwelcome implications of the narratable – that it can never generate the terms for its own arrest. These must be imported from elsewhere, from a world untouched by the conditions of narratability” (266-267).

For in Carmilla, the nightmare is not just a dream. It is a waking nightmare that continues to filter into the reality. Eve Sedgwick, in The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, describes that when:

an individual fictional self is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialized in the following way. It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access… The self and whatever it is that is outside have a proper, natural, necessary connection to each other, but one that the self is suddenly incapable of making. The inside life and the outside life have to continue separately, becoming counterparts rather than partners, the relationship between them one of parallels and correspondences rather than communication. This, though it may happen in an instant, is a fundamental reorganization, creating a doubleness where singleness should be. And the lengths there are to go to reintegrate the sundered elements—finally, the impossibility of restoring them to their original oneness—are the most characteristic energies of the Gothic novel. The worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels do not occur in, for example, the catacombs of the Inquisition or the stultification of nightmares. Instead, they are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall. The fires, earthquakes, and insurrections that restore the prisoners of tyranny to their “natural” freedom are tremendously more violent than what has gone on either inside or outside the prisons. Similarly, no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up from some innocuous dream to find it true. The barrier between the self and what should belong to it can be caused by anything and nothing; but only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them again. (12-13)
The motif of doubleness permeates le Fanu’s novel, where Laura encounters Carmilla as a child and as a teenager, in dreams and in reality. Laura awakes from her dream to find that it is, in fact, true, but the problem is that her narrative renders the reader unsure as to which aspect she considers to be the nightmare: the fact that Carmilla, her double, is a vampire, or that she has been violently murdered. While Carmilla is perceived as a human girl, Laura’s father is benevolently oblivious to his daughter who is nearing a languorous death. It is when the threat of vampirism emerges that the men must join forces to stake Carmilla’s body. The fear of aberrant desire is thus eliminated, matching up with our notion of Victorian suppression that interlaces with the fear of sexuality and the struggle for sexual expression. In Dracula, the mingling of male fluids is not taboo due to the “heroic” purpose it serves: to revive the body of Lucy. The presence of a female body alleviates any threat of homosexuality; the need to reinforce heterosexuality induce the men to more or less inject their blood into Lucy one after another in a horrific, comradely rape-like scene. But Carmilla’s sharing of fluids with Laura, and Bertha too, creates a male urgency to rid the dangerously charming fiend who must not contaminate the young girls with knowledge of sexual perversity.

What remains unspoken (or unconsidered), of course, is the fact that Laura’s body already shares fluids with Carmilla, who is her ancestor in addition to her lover. Alice would hardly be called Gothic; it is a treasure of that category called children’s literature, a nonsensical, brilliant tale designed for children. Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales notes that a child’s love for fairy tales derives from the lesson “that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust
hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious” (8). According to Bettleheim, children enjoy reading fairy tales by sympathizing with the protagonist who will, undoubtedly, emerge victorious as a hero by the ending. But similarly to Laura, Alice does not recover from her ordeal-laden dream to mature in the typical Bildungsroman fashion, nor does she prove the ability to distinguish herself from Wonderland creatures. Instead, she continues to speak of her dream to her sister and exits the narrative, which is strangely sustained by more musings on Wonderland by Alice’s sister, who ought to be the more sensible adult figure.

Moreover, neither Laura nor Alice fit the formula of the female Gothic heroine because they are not particularly susceptible to romantic sentiment, nor are they themselves to be in terrible danger. In that sense, it would seem more apt to denote the open-ended nonclosure as the truly Gothic element of the text rather than the Other; in both texts, dreaming has the effect of continuing into reality, which in turn begins to resemble the dream in a circular fashion. While popular, *Carmilla* and *Alice* received some strongly unfavorable reviews. According to the *Saturday Review* in 1880, “*Carmilla* is a tale that every parent should make haste not to place in the hands of the young. Neither Poe nor Richepin ever invented anything more horrible than the dusky, undulating nocturnal shape of her who was a fair woman by daylight and an insatiate fiend at night.” *The Athenaeum* in 1865 called *Alice* “a dream-story; but who can, in cold blood, manufacture a dream, with all its loops and ties, and loose threads, and entanglements, and inconsistencies, and passages which lead to nothing…We fancy any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, over-wrought story.” I would like to suggest that it is precisely the inconsistent language, silences that denote only a partial imparting of narrative, and
desirous relations between the girl and Other that free limitations of the girl heroine’s identity.

Their narratives ask us to reconsider what constitutes the very acts of reading and narrating.
CHAPTER I Carmilla: Narrative Gaps and Telling Silences

“Carmilla comes home to share not only the domestic present, but lost mothers and dreams, weaving herself so tightly into Laura’s perceptions that without a cumbersome parade of male authorities to stop her narrative, her story would never end.”

Our Vampires, Ourselves

As Nina Auerbach brilliantly describes in Our Vampires, Ourselves, vampires have lived throughout the centuries in various forms and societies. If the 18th-century Gothic novel explored ghosts and psychological terror, the following century saw a popular surge in literary vampires, beginning most significantly with, according to Auerbach, the Byronic Lord Ruthven. Unlike her predecessors, Carmilla is a female. She is also a friend to Laura. As Auerbach puts it, Carmilla presents “a sharing self” (38). Critical scholarship on le Fanu’s Carmilla seems to reach the consensus that the strong, desirous relationship between Carmilla and Laura “frees” Laura from many of the inevitable domestic, societal, and sexual constraints she must face. Indeed, the nature of their relationship is a pivotal aspect to the text. However, overshadowed by the title of “first lesbian vampire story,” the role of the narrator, Laura, is frequently overlooked. While a psychoanalytic approach aptly shows how Carmilla performs the role of substitute mother figure as well as lover, signifying the agency of female as opposed to male characters, or perhaps the monstrosity of the female body, this thesis focuses more on how the intentional narrative gaps and speech figure in the text. The true agency of le Fanu’s narrator is language, or lack thereof. His text does not simply present vampirism as a metaphor of the unspeakable, of lesbianism, although the term “lesbian” is frequently applied to his protagonists. That term itself is reductive, for the relations between Laura and Carmilla derive significance from the narrator’s choice to not label them in any way.
Friend or no, the presence of a vampire inevitably spawns that of a human prey, a victim of vampirism. This applies to *Carmilla* and criticism on the text as well. By the time she is narrating her story, clearly Laura is aware of how events will unfold. Yet her language when narrating incidents that involve Carmilla is frequently confusing and disconcerting to read and interpret, asking us to reconsider the terms of vampirism and victimization. The language that both girls employ disrupts linear narrative and form to the extent that it is impossible to reach narrative closure. Carmilla has just as much agency as her male predecessors, but Laura makes it clear that her participation in the relationship between herself and Carmilla is by her own choice. What disrupts the text further is the gradually, definitively fading distinction between girl and vampire. Laura importantly differs from Mina in that she finds a vampiric death attractive; Mina virtuously demands that her husband behead her should she develop into one of Dracula’s brides. Laura’s narrative depicts Carmilla as a girl through Laura’s eyes, as a fiend through the General’s. Count Dracula’s figure is intimidating; as Laura’s double, Carmilla is all the more threatening because she looks just like a pretty little girl. This is why the General is quick to label her a “fiend,” but his efforts to strip Carmilla of her sexuality do not solidify the vampire figure into something that male characters can understand.

As noted by Christopher Craft in *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Discourse in English Discourse 1850-1920*, the vampiric mouth equivocates, “luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone” (74). “And it asks some disquieting questions. Are we male or are we female? Do we have penetrators or orifices?...What are the fluent relations between blood and semen, milk and blood?” Craft states, reaching the conclusion that “this mouth is the mouth of all vampires, male and female. It – and they – are
both both.” Carmilla both penetrates Laura in addition to other girls and seeks to procreate in a sense. But the most disquieting aspect in trying to make out whether she is friend, lover, creator, mother, male, female or all of the above, is that Carmilla speaks of a time when she was a human girl. These hints elicit the possibility that Laura, throughout the process of seduction and vamping, is aware of what consequences would befall her from the start, or perhaps was even “infected,” half-transformed since she was a young child. Unlike the egomaniacal Dracula and his brides, Carmilla describes her undead state as one derived from love and not violence or rape, a cycle that will repeat through herself and her “offspring.” The open ending of the text and its failure (or refusal) to frame brings us back to the beginning of Dr. Hesselius’ account, reminding the reader that Laura is dead by this time and may possibly be preying on other girls.

Therefore, the relationship between the two girls cannot be strictly defined as lesbian, but must be re-examined through the lenses of their interaction, and its influences on the identity and gender of a girl impending on womanhood. When Carmilla enters Laura’s life, an otherworldly sphere is created, a space where the girl is neither wholly human nor Other. The text does not allow comfortable, limiting categorization. Instead, she is presented as midst-transformation in her embodiment of desires, and ideas of gender and sexuality that are forbidden to her. Interestingly, despite the Englishness and domestic propriety that her father emphasizes, Laura is susceptible to Carmilla’s touch from their initial encounter. In fact, it is questionable as to whether this desirous touch is infectious or inherent within. In both le Fanu and Carroll’s texts, the Other is not presented as merely a sexual predator, or a threat to the girl’s purity. In its seduction of the girl heroine, and invasion of the home, the Other configures a threat at the surface. But clearly, the home and the foreign do not exist in separate spheres, for their
boundaries blur and bleed into one another. Sleep and dreams interlace with reality, and the waking nightmare is full-blown. Rendering this all the more dangerous, the seduction is never a one-sided process or attraction; both Laura and Alice are eager to experience and affiliate themselves with the Other.

In “Other Love: le Fanu’s Carmilla as Lesbian Gothic,” Adrienne Antrim Major claims that le Fanu portrays male and female characters at war in his text. Rational and virtuous, the men are ultimately unable to guard their daughters from “degenerative feminine evil” (153), due to “feminine sexuality and insidious female bloodlines.” While it is true that General Spielsdorf condemns the Karnsteins’ bad bloodlines, le Fanu and his heroine must be given more credit, for noticeably, from the perspective of Laura, Carmilla is never a frightening creature. Rather, as Major points out, Laura’s sexual desire for Carmilla metonymically transposes into a desire for knowledge about Carmilla. Her strong curiosity and desire depict that, indeed, it is not the forceful, dominant Other that infiltrates the domestic – the heroine is always an active participant. As a manifestation of the Laura’s desire, Carmilla represents a double self and identity that is reinforced by the fact that they share blood before the first bite has even occurred. Ironically, male figures in Carmilla attempt to shield Laura from “knowing” Carmilla, but the truth is that Laura’s knowledge equals that of the vampire expert; she has had firsthand experience. It is their lack of knowledge that induce their constant failure to recognize, much less control, the invading vampire. To the moment that Carmilla is staked, the male characters are unable to correctly read and interpret the nature of the relations between the “innocent” Victorian girl and the vampire who is described and addressed in similar terms – until the intervention of the General, Carmilla, despite her queer attributes, is praised for her beauty, manners, and apparent fragility.
Hence, reconsidering vampirism and victimization in *Carmilla* necessitates a reconsideration of the girl’s so-called innocence and what “unnatural” desire denotes. It is a thin line between innocence and contamination; that Carmilla’s vamping constitutes a threat would indicate Laura’s contrasting innocence. But gaps pervade Laura’s narration, not because she is so naive as to be unable to recognize desire, as she undoubtedly does recognize her desire for Carmilla. Withheld knowledge cannot be equated to repression either, for Le Fanu’s protagonist need not verbally outline that desire: her language vividly recreates it in its incoherent form and structure on the page for the reader. More tellingly, Laura does not question her own desire – only Carmilla’s. While Laura finds Carmilla’s behavior odd a number of times, she does not reject her advances or is unable to, nor does she alert her “protector,” her father. Mutual attraction between the vampire and girl has already been acknowledged in scholarship that labels it lesbian, but what is striking in this text is not its same-sex nature. Rather, it is how utterly natural it is conceived as by both female characters. Carmilla’s impassioned lessons and verbal pleadings have sunk in well. Laura is even more revolutionary than she appears at first sight, as a heroine who, upon discovery of her friend and lover’s nature, unwaveringly retains this natural desire. Baron Vordenburg explains vampirism’s “curious lore,” but what is actually “curious” is Laura’s reciprocating natural attraction towards the vampire. From her perspective, we can gather, it is the General, and not the vampire who is the true invader.

Accordingly, the text presents innocence and unnatural desire as male-constructed ideals, as their attempts to shield off the unknown Other. But the text shows us that these attempts are fruitless, for Laura is not Carmilla’s first object of passion, making no attempt to reach closure by providing explanations for Carmilla’s “family.” The structure of the text itself refuses male
authority; Dr. Hesselius’ prologue frames only the beginning. A scientific “expert” and collector of case studies, he announces that “[Laura] probably, could have added little to the Narrative which she communicates in the following pages, with, so far as I can pronounce, such a conscientious particularity” (243). Despite his condescending tone, he is immediately determined to be no expert. The “conscientious particularity” he praises is, rather, a slippery narration which Laura imparts to a reader she specifically selects. His authority is further undermined when Laura, and not his ending remarks, conclude the novel. Major suggests that:

Le Fanu encodes as lesbianism the dangers of feminine intellectual discourse that eliminates the male through the exchange between female writers and readers and the development of a narrative using the patterns of a feminine literary tradition, the Gothic. Le Fanu ultimately fails, just as his masculine heroes fail in the text, to contain his narrative because of the power he has invested in the lesbian Other. Unable to understand the feminine, unable to protect her, unable to keep her from her own sexuality, and ultimately unable to draw her voice into the reasonable conclusion desired by the patriarchy, le Fanu’s text frees the lesbian Laura to a half-life of living death and unlooses the bonds of narrative closure to the possibilities of continuation. (164)

This perceived failure is actually le Fanu’s success, all the more because as a male writer; he does not align his interests with those of his masculine heroes but his female narrator. Unlike Dracula’s sister-brides, Carmilla is not decapitated and staked as a shrieking, fiendish creature bloated with blood as is Lucy. Laura’s memory of Carmilla translated into her narrative allows Carmilla to maintain her dignity and the warm desire shared by Laura.

Late 19th-century Gothic fiction often sets the scene in the domestic and in England rather than somewhere foreign, relating to anxieties of the familial structure and anxieties over leaky bodies, identity, race, class, and gender. Elizabeth Signorotti thus explains in “Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in Carmilla and Dracula” that le Fanu’s move was radical, locating his novel in a province far from England where women could supposedly express their sexuality.
freely. In doing so, she suggests, le Fanu allowed them to escape traditional roles relegated to women, which led to Stoker’s forceful reclaiming of the body of women. Indeed, le Fanu’s female characters are given a freedom that is seldom seen in the Victorian Gothic. But this is not due to the foreignness of the location; if anything, the domestic space is more strictly English than ever. Laura’s father strives to reinforce a patriotic, English identity in the domestic sphere, speaking English to “prevent its becoming a lost language among us” (245). Shakespeare’s texts are utilized “by way of keeping up our English” (251), and even tea makes a regular appearance due to his insistence, as if speaking English, quoting Shakespeare, and drinking the British national beverage – in other words, performing Englishness – will dispel foreignness and the threat of becoming foreign. But this also illustrates the root of his fear: that physical displacement will somehow deprive his household and himself of the English language.

Naturally, his efforts do not guard the home from Carmilla’s influence, and his attachment to Shakespeare’s plays re-emerge as one of the forewarning signals of Carmilla’s arrival, for his works are actually among the earliest that mesh the foreign threat, and questions distinctions between self and otherness. Carmilla effectively shows that she can be just as catching in the English household as she is outside its barriers where she feeds on and abandons peasant girls. In light of the vampire’s “catchingness,” le Fanu does not appear to depict a narrator who is placed at a situational advantage in any way. In fact, Laura is, if anything, presented as perfectly secluded, vulnerable, a half-orphan, and set up to be victimized. Her pseudo-English home is “lonely and primitive” (244), in the vicinity of a ruined village, complete with a mystery the narrator promises, rather dubiously, to unravel “another time” (245) – of course, she never actually does so. Her childhood is jealously guarded by her nurse,
governess, and father, who studiously keep her in “ignorance of ghost stories, of fairy tales...[that] makes us cover up our heads when the door creaks suddenly, or the flicker of an expiring candle makes the shadow of a bed-post dance upon the wall, nearer to our faces” (246). Such “happy” efforts are futile, for such is exactly what Carmilla is, straight out of ghostly lore, a flickering shadow of light that interlaces dreams with reality.

Physically, the narrator is displaced in her own narrative: she lives in Styria, and “bear[s] an English name, although [she] never saw England” (244). Interestingly, Laura extends this displacement to her reader, who is English-ified as soon as the narrator asserts, “your English miles” (244). This “you” is also someone “who only lived in towns” (258), and consequentially, her very specific reader materializes as an English spectator living in a town, reading a narrative of English people in a foreign land. Laura’s invocation subsequently induces her reader to perform the role of someone who is, like Laura, seduced by and attracted to Carmilla; the act of reading Laura’s narrative is to implicate one’s self in the narrative. Laura’s insistence on her “English” name and her English reader takes on severely different dimensions from that of her father. Her performance throughout the text enacts as evidence that otherness successfully permeates domestic structures, as well as English identity. This is also implied by the fact that neither she nor Carmilla informs her reader as to what her “English” name is, since evidently it does not matter what nationality that name is. Instead, it is Laura’s father who invokes her name. And this suggestion of leaky names and bodies may potentially infect the reader as Laura is, regardless of nationality and identity. Before she begins her narration, Laura’s reader is asked to put “faith in [her] veracity to believe [her] story” (248). “It is not only true, nevertheless, but
truth of which I have been an eye-witness” (248), she goes on to claim, as if it is not sufficient to write that her story is true, but must emphasize that it is what she has seen.

Laura thus differentiates rather oddly between narrative truth and the act of witnessing. The idea of witnessing is significant to the text, in particular since Laura’s ability to read does not translate into her narration in as straightforward a manner as she indicates. Laura is an incisive reader; by no means is she ignorant or imperceptive as some scholars have indicated. More than that, even though she is the sole narrator of her story, she does not, in fact, witness all of the incidents that occur. This implies that what Laura has not witnessed and other characters have, then, is not necessarily “truth.” As a narrator, she has recorded what she has, and has not, witnessed. But what she does witness is complicated by her emotions toward Carmilla, which lead to moments of incoherence or silence. Seemingly, she is unable or unwilling to view Carmilla as a monster because of these emotions. But several instances expose that Laura is the only human character who perceives what is not quite right. When Carmilla’s mother parts with her indisposed daughter, Laura notices that “the lady threw on her daughter a glance which [she] fancied was not quite so affectionate as one might have anticipated” and is “filled with wonder that [her] father did not seem to perceive the change” (254). Paradoxically, the efforts of her caregivers have had an unintended effect; due to Laura’s ignorance of ghosts and monsters, during her initial encounter with Carmilla as a child, her first impression is not fearful but favorable, pleased at the sight of “a solemn, but very pretty face” (246).

Carmilla is presented as “natural” from the start. According to Auerbach, “for le Fanu, the strangeness of vampirism is its kinship to the commonplace…releas[ing] it from both perversity and enchantment; as the lives of Carmilla and Laura flow into each other, with the
voice of one spectral mother summoning both girls” (44). Her sudden appearance and physical touch does not frighten or surprise Laura; instead, she sleeps in comfort, “immediately delightfully soothed,” when Carmilla mothers her. This is when Carmilla for the first time penetrates Laura who is awakened by the sensation “as if two needles ran into [her] breast very deep” (246). Carmilla’s penetration of Laura’s breast, other than its sexual associations, also implicates a reference to Laura’s absent mother, for it is where life-giving milk flows. A distorted dynamics is created by Carmilla’s mothering of Laura, and her simultaneous bite, where both girls respectively take on roles of child and mother, in addition to that of lover. During the Victorian era, the issue of hereditary disease was highly relevant, most doctors seeming to have believed that the disorders of the mother would pass down to their daughters. As the daughter of her mother, a Karnstein, Laura’s fate is perhaps already sealed. Because of Laura’s loneliness, the failure of patriarchal control, the location of the bite, and the blood that the girls share, many critics lay emphasis on the mother, or absence thereof, which alludes to the possibility of Carmilla as a strange, monstrous mother figure.

In “In the Name of the Mother: Perverse Maternity in Carmilla,” Jarlath Killeen claims that “although there is obviously a strong homoerotic element to this relationship, that they are related through maternal blood is, perhaps, even more significant than the probability that they desire each other sexually” (366). He further argues that given the frightful image of Carmilla drenched in blood, the monstrous associations connecting Carmilla with:

menstruation, vampirism, insanity, uterine irrationality and biological corruption, her perverse maternal/infantile relationship with Laura would seem to be a version of the corrupted image of the mother and child that ‘experts’ on child rearing and maternity cautioned against again and again throughout the nineteenth century. Carmilla is the monstrous mother who feeds on her own children; she is also an evil baby who drains the
energy from the mother who gives her suck… Carmilla’s intervention will ensure that neither Laura nor Bertha grow up, never come out of the transition phase, and always remain in flux, in-between, luminal. (377)

Remaining “in flux” in a transitional phase between girlhood and womanhood would indicate that, for Laura and Bertha to attain proper maturation, they would need to figuratively murder the mother figure and integrate into a heteronormative patriarchal structure. Laura’s absent mother does not solely indicate that Carmilla and Laura find in one another the mother they lack. Additionally, the view that Carmilla feeds on Laura like an “evil baby” is one that echoes that of the male characters rather than the narrator. After Laura cries out, Carmilla vanishes to return a second time, perhaps at the most “proper” time for vampiric courtship – when she is on the brink of womanhood. Thus, their fulfillment of various familial roles suggests a cyclical wholeness, rather than perversity, of their relationship. It is after this initial physical contact with Carmilla that Laura’s language starts to slip strangely. While she calls Carmilla an “apparition,” as if she has been convinced by her nurse that her vision was a dream, she also states that “I was not comforted, for I knew the visit of the strange woman was not a dream; and I was awfully frightened” (247).

Carmilla is a flesh-and-blood ghost, a phantom that can exist outside the realm of dreams, uninhibited by time or place. This is why narrative time is not coherent or linear, even after Carmilla is staked. Initially, Laura asserts that “eight years have passed since then” (245), referring to her second encounter with Carmilla, at the time of which she was nineteen. However, shortly after she states that ten years have passed since the date that her story takes place: “I now write, after an interval of more than ten years…with a confused and horrible recollection of certain occurrences and situations, in the ordeal through which I was unconsciously passing;
though with a vivid and very sharp remembrance of the main current of my story” (264). Narrating at the age of twenty-seven, that more than ten years have passed would indicate that her story begins when she first encountered Carmilla. This signifies that the “main current” of her story commences at the instance of the first bite, after which she, though with a “confused and horrible recollection,” remembers that mark on her body. While the age at which Laura feels sexual desire for Carmilla, at that uncertain stage between girlhood and womanhood, is indeed significant, Laura’s reader must focus too on the period at which Laura truly begins her story. The confusion over narrative time is not glossed over with any explanation. It is visible enough that Laura’s body and identity have been influenced even before her involvement in a same-sex relationship with Carmilla at the age of nineteen. The bite has remained within, like a dormant infection, but intangible and incorporeal, visibly manifesting itself through the very speech Laura employs.

Her desire for Carmilla obfuscates past and present narratives; she is decidedly unreliable in the depiction of her story, an ordeal during which she was unconscious, describing it as confusing and vivid at the same time. Just as she does not need to explain herself in her self-explanatory narrative, she rejects the use of coherent, grammatical sentences and linear time. Laura then excuses her perplexing statement by again aligning herself with her reader. “In all lives there are certain emotional scenes, those in which our passions have been most wildly and terribly roused, that are of all others the most vaguely and dimly remembered” (264), she asserts. Laura’s assumption that the reader empathizes with her naturally implicates the reader, whose body also becomes marked – Laura, neither fully girl nor vampire, creates a narrative which functions as a bite itself. Carmilla’s first bite not only tampers with memory, time, and language,
but it effectively recreates Laura’s past, who “forget[s] all [her] life preceding that event, and for some time after it” (248). Carmilla fills in the blanked out spaces. Laura remembers her “new,” vibrantly intense past: “But the scenes I have just described stand out vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria” (248). Just as Laura is physically isolated in Styria, when she is yet six, Carmilla becomes an isolated memory of the past for her, an encapsulation of something “so beautiful and so indescribably engaging” (261) that she finds it near impossible to verbally articulate what that is.

Unlike Dracula hunters who must study vampirism in order to hunt down Count Dracula, le Fanu’s vampire is characterized by familiarity. Carmilla’s “strange fixed smile of recognition” (246) is several years later echoed by Laura’s mutual recognition; their second encounter reduces Laura’s capability to speak altogether. “There was a silence of fully a minute, and then at length she spoke; I could not” (259), Laura recalls. Recoiling with shock, Laura discovers the face “which had visited [her] in [her] childhood at night, which remained so fixed in [her] memory, and on which [she] had for so many years so often ruminated with horror, when no one suspected of what [she] was thinking” (259). The mere repetition of “so” in this one sentence emphasizes just how much of an impact Carmilla had had on her, even as a young girl. And this memory, once ingrained in her memory, had been for her a secret that she fixated on in privacy. Even at the age of six, she had withheld a strongly impressive memory from the household, as if speaking of it would somehow diminish its power. Moreover, the source of Laura’s “horror” is unclear – is it the fright she had received, or is it, perhaps, the fear of Carmilla’s nightly visits being unrepeated? For, even amidst her severe shock, Laura finds Carmilla “pretty, even beautiful,” and recognizes the “same melancholy expression” (259) on her face – the gap
between their first and second encounters clearly has not discolored Laura’s recollection of Carmilla’s face.

Male characters in *Carmilla*, on the other hand, do not suffer from loss of speech or utilize slippery language. They are the heroic predecessors of the group that Van Helsing later leads, ready to destroy the vampire who they need only know as “fiend who betrayed our infatuated hospitality” (249). In the midst of General Spielsdorf’s outrage that he did not, as he believed, receive “innocence, gaiety, a charming companion for [his] lost Bertha” (249), his primary source of comfort and relief derives from the fact that she “died in the peace of innocence” (249). As is manifest from the repetition of the word, innocence is crucial to the General, who thanks God that his “child died without a suspicion of the cause of her sufferings…gone without so much as conjecturing the nature of her illness, and the accursed passion of the agent of all this misery” (250). It is decidedly critical for him that Bertha’s death did not involve any “accursed passion” on her side, which would be devastatingly perverse from his perspective. The General’s invocation of both religion and science vividly delineates the degree to which male characters are ill equipped to hunt and eliminate a vampire that they cannot begin to comprehend. In fact, Carmilla makes an eloquent case for the “naturalness” of her desire and Laura’s ensuing death. In addition, Laura’s withholding of knowledge from her father (and presumably Bertha’s from the General) strongly suggests that Bertha, too, may be just as receptive to “accursed” desire.

An “illness,” the General calls Bertha’s transformative state. Since he is incapable of comprehending or acknowledging the possibility of Bertha’s desire, he attempts to categorize it by means of scientific terms. However, if illness is vampirism, then the cause of infection is
Carmilla, and she is certainly catching. Any female body is liable to “catch” infection; Carmilla-as-disease is all the more terrifying and threatening for its lack of limitation. Both the General and Laura’s father also do not realize the implications of Carmilla’s selective vamping. As a Karnstein herself, she courts girls who are of that same bloodline. In effect, both Laura and Bertha are suitable candidates to “catch” vampirism – the same, warm blood flowing in their veins is a signifier of latent desire. Carmilla is, then, not just a type of disease but a girl-vampire who stimulates vampiric germs already within. Le Fanu’s text therefore presents religion as a “male” weapon in regard to how it is manipulated. Carmilla is outwardly enraged by this male strand of religious beliefs that reject her presence and identity and Laura is as well, but in a less noticeable manner. The household gathers to pray for Laura, and perhaps dispel any hovering ghostly presence, but Laura does not pray by instinct when she is frightened. It is a utility that she does not require, because Carmilla is a natural desire, not a devil in her eyes.

Not warded off by prayers, physically, Carmilla emerges from the nature that surrounds Laura and her home when they meet for the second time. Nature does not either embrace or reject Carmilla’s presence, but acts as a harbinger to her arrival. While the nature surrounding the domestic space appears to isolate Laura with a “thickening forest” (250), eerily, a narrow road and bridge connects her to other inhabited and uninhabited villages. Its unguarded openness also serves as a road for the Other to travel freely. Reinforced by a scenic, idyllic illustration, the arrival of Carmilla is an uncanny mixture of beauty, isolation, and a sense of blindness, during early evening hours when “a thin film of mist was stealing, like smoke, marking the distances with a transparent veil” (251). Associated with the moon, too, Carmilla’s presence seems to make it shine with a brighter light. Repeatedly, the moon acts as a signifier of the uncanny and foreign.
Mademoiselle DeLafontaine’s musings on the moon infuses a prevailing foreboding; “when the moon shone with a light so intense it was well known that it indicated a special spiritual activity…it had marvelous physical influences connected with life” (251). Light reflected from the moon itself takes on a supernatural cast, as it graces the schloss with a “slivery splendour, as if unseen hands had lighted up the rooms to receive fairy guests” (251). Compared to its unnatural brilliance, the ensuing carriage accident that conveys Carmilla to the household is actually perceived as a quite natural, albeit exciting and infrequent, occurrence. Slipping in through the cracks of the building’s walls, the moon’s delicate beams appear to “prepare” the family for Carmilla’s reception, lighting the interior of the schloss with light as airy and dazzling as the girl-vampire herself.

Here, it is worth investigating the Shakespeare that Laura’s father so diligently quotes. The text contains lines from *The Merchant of Venice*:

“In truth I know not why I am so sad.

It wearies me; you say it wearies you;

But how I got by it- came by it”

However, the correct version of this section, and the lines that follow, are thus:

But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,

What stuff ‘tis made of, whereof it is born,

I am to learn;

And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,

That I have much ado to know myself. (Antonio, The Merchant of Venice I.I)

In the incorrect version, the phrase “how I caught it, found it” is changed to “how I got by it.” If
Carmilla is a disease, as implied by the General, then she is a disease that is voluntarily sought after by Laura, who not only catches it, but “finds” it. This places a greater deal of responsibility on Laura, since Carmilla is not an unlucky occurrence but something that Laura herself sought out and discovered. Perhaps these dangerous implications must be concealed in the text, and hence, the misquotation of Shakespeare. “I am to learn” sums up, indeed, the initial glimmerings of Laura’s transformative stage. Foreshadowing what Laura is to learn of this disease, what it constitutes, and its sources, even the father figure’s masculine, patriotic linguistic weapon points to Laura’s readiness to learn. Carmilla is not the only catching body. Carmilla’s supposed mother, like her daughter, is indefinably awe-inspiring and charming; Laura observes that she is natural and unnatural at the same time, speaking and acting in a “theatrical way which is…natural to some people” (253). When they choose to, Carmilla and her mother enchant and momentarily infect male characters as well, as manifested by the men’s readiness to obey their commands.

As Amy Leal points out in “Unnameable Desires in le Fanu’s Carmilla,” le Fanu’s vampires must adhere to the restrictive laws of recreating names from anagrams. This is one of the laws that “expose” Carmilla to vampire hunters. However, in light of Carmilla’s and her mother’s effortless recreation of identity over the years, names seem to hold comparatively less value – Laura never utters her name either. Clearly, lack of a stable identity does not impair the vampire’s abilities to convince others of her social status. The narrator does not attempt to guess at her mysterious origins, leaving her reader to guess at what she whispers to Carmilla before she leaves her – as most likely it is not, as Madame Perrodon guesses, “a little benediction” (254). Once her newfound companion performs the role of enamored suitor, Laura complains of its oddities, ignoring the fact that it is she who initiates this performance. “I took her hand as I spoke.
I was a little shy, as lonely people are, but the situation made me eloquent, and even bold” (259), she relates rather proudly. Carmilla fully emerges as Laura’s Gothic double; both girls have been haunted by the same dream and memory. “I saw you – most assuredly you – as I see you now; a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes, and lips – your lips – you, as you are here” (260), Carmilla recounts. The repeated ellipses denote that it is not just Laura whose language is failing, but whereas Laura reverts to silences, or declarations that what she means to describe is indescribable, Carmilla is overtly passionate. Her focus on “you” and “your lips,” and broken language signifies strong sexual desire, a desire that a well-constructed, grammatical sentence perhaps cannot convey thoroughly in its full meaning.

Narrative voids punctuate Laura’s speech as well; prompted by the question whether “[she] feel[s] as strangely drawn towards [Carmilla]” (260) as Carmilla herself, Laura cannot be as plain in meaning or straightforward, struggling to reconcile her attraction as she “rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger… ‘drawn towards her’” (260), and a lingering repulsion. This ambiguity leads her to avoid speaking to the question further, instead stating generally that “young people like, and even love, on impulse” (261). In this generic statement, she credits her youth for her inexplicable feelings, just as she earlier excuses the confusion saturating her memory. But youth and age means little in this narrative. As teleological time fails to fixate for Laura Carmilla’s memory, resulting in a narrative which conflates past and present, Carmilla’s breaking up of sentences queers time. While their deconstructive language is not strictly what Helene Cixous denotes as a feminine language, it demonstrates the ineffectuality of masculine narrative form. Carmilla affirms that she saw Laura, “most assuredly you,” referring to when Laura was six. At the same time, she collapses the younger Laura with the “you, as you
are here.” Carmilla need not differentiate between the two Lauras, since time and place do not affect her body – immortality is her inheritance, gift, and “disease.”

Her collapse of time further signifies a bridging in the gap between their first and second meetings, during which Carmilla was not physically present. The “double time” that Rachel Bowlby identifies thus allows the past to consistently exist in the presence via the vehicle of memory. This act of bridging is later echoed by Laura, when she continues to hear Carmilla’s light footprint by the end of her narrative, expecting to see her at any moment. Laura’s narrative effectively shows the reader what it does not say. At times, she seems virtually unable to narrate what she means to. Attempting to lay out facts about her friend that did not “please [her] so well” (262), she is promptly distracted by Carmilla’s beautiful features, her complexion, eyes, and hair. Her narrative deviates, instead resulting in Laura’s reminiscences on how she “often placed [her] hands under [Carmilla’s hair], and laughed with wonder at its weight” (262). “Heavens! If I had but known all!” (262), she declares immediately afterwards. But the reader cannot help but question, if Laura had “known all,” would there have been a difference? Even as a narrator fully aware of Carmilla’s identity, no longer placed within her story, she is still capable of being distracted by the remembrance of the hair that flowed over and weighed down her hands. It is as if speaking of Carmilla invokes her ghostly presence.

Hence, Laura must begin again: “I said there were particulars which did not please me” (262). All that a displeased Laura can surmise from Carmilla’s vague hints are her name, her “very ancient and noble” family, and her home which “lay in the direction of the west” (263). Carmilla pleads sweetly:

Think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if
your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love. (263)

But Carmilla exposes more of her history than Laura realizes. As a vampire, she must obey the laws of her clan; she cannot speak of her identity, which is her strength and also her weakness, since she must hide who she is. “I live in your warm life,” she declares. Indeed, she lives on Laura’s warmth by feeding on her blood, and the lack of Laura’s reaction at her friend’s assertion, “you shall die,” is stranger than the speech uttered by Carmilla. The dash following the word “die,” and successive “die, sweetly die,” fundamentally functions as a command. Speaking of vampiric death, life, and rebirth, Carmilla foreshadows what is to come: her prey and lover will join her as a vampire. As she “draws near” to Laura, entrancing her, and penetrating her, Laura, as a vampire, will also learn to “draw near to others” and “the rapture of that cruelty,” vampirism, “which yet is love.” In her proximity, Carmilla is irresistible; Laura’s helplessness accentuates the opposition between her will and capability to extricate herself “from these foolish embraces” (264), her energies failing her until Carmilla withdraws her arms first.

But Carmilla’s vamping refuses to be categorized as victimization; it is another form of loving female bonding. According to Marcus, the Victorian novel worked to reproduce gender norms, and female friendship was one of the relations that defined normative femininity. To Carmilla, vamping is part of such normative female companionship and courtship. She “cannot help it” just as Laura cannot help reverting to admiring and recoiling from her companion. “In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable…mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts
about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (264), le Fanu’s heroine confesses. By means of distorted language and linearity, gaps that do not denote “innocence” but knowledge pervade Carmilla, necessitating a re-construing of silences as sites of agency. These telling silences continue throughout Laura’s process of remembering Carmilla. While Laura appears constantly as a young girl, “innocent” and naive to the degree that she seems simply unable to grasp the fact that Carmilla is a vampire, she undoubtedly recognizes Carmilla’s behavior to resemble that of a lover. This is why Carmilla’s burning gaze and her rapid gasps of breath shame Laura – they resemble too strongly “the ardour of a lover” (264). Whether or not Laura has had a lover before (highly likely she has not), she does realize that such is the usual behavior of lovers. While she does not exactly utter why this makes her feel uncomfortable, she admits that she is conflicted: Carmilla’s ardor is both hateful and overpowering.

Affected more than she would prefer to admit, Laura questions Carmilla as to whether they are related; she attempts to solve the quandary she is faced with logically and unsentimentally (although she never explains why it would make better sense should they be related). But even as Laura asks Carmilla, “Are we related?” (264), she notably does not narrate what she feels when Carmilla drops hot kisses along her skin. Indeed, she does not need to. What she says in lieu of that speaks more loudly to her reader. “You must not, I hate it; I don’t know you – I don’t know myself when you look so and talk so” (264-5), Laura protests to her passionate companion. The problem for Laura is not so much Carmilla’s lover-like behavior, then, as the reaction it triggers within her. For, essentially, Laura’s confusion over Carmilla’s identity bleeds into a questioning of her own identity. Amid her inexplicable identity crisis, Laura only
determines that Carmilla’s erratic behavior derives from a “momentary breaking out of suppressed instinct and emotion” (265). In doing so, she does not acknowledge that her own reactionary “vehemence” is of a similar kind of bursting out. On the other hand, Carmilla is rarely angry with Laura. One occasion appears to be in relation to religion, for she expresses anger about the fact that Laura should assume their religions are the same. But perhaps Carmilla’s anger relates more to her exasperation that Laura should feel attachment to her life. “Why, you must die – everyone must die; and all are happier when they do” (266), Carmilla protests.

To this claim, Laura remains silent, and importantly so. We are subtly reminded that Laura, the narrator, is dead at this point. Steadily, death inches closer and closer to the schloss. Death, murder, and disease saturate the air, not only echoed by Carmilla, Laura’s dreams, and the deaths of the peasant girls, but by Laura’s father who declares that “horrible fancies do accompany some forms of fever” (267). Rather than give credit to the account of the peasants, he believes that fancy brings on fever, and eventually, inevitable death. “These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror, that have infested their neighbors” (269), he laments. To which Carmilla replies, “I am so afraid of fancying I see such things; I think it would be as bad as reality” (270). The troubling fact is, dream and reality, fancy and reality suffuse one another – they are Carmilla. This would indicate that Carmilla herself is a disease, and she is indeed catching, considering the death count. But this puts Laura in a curious position. She “catches” Carmilla, too, but she also functions as a cure when Carmilla asks Laura to press her “hard – hard – harder” (267). More than carrying sexual intonations, this request implies that, strangely, Laura’s touch cures Carmilla. The categorization
of Carmilla as “disease” by Laura’s father is complicated further. Carmilla questions what it means to be “natural,” by declaring that “this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature – don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains?” (270). Carmilla-as-disease proceeds from Nature, in the earth, and under the earth. Thus, Carmilla’s statement re-categorizes her as something not quite definable – for she is not a disease, nor ghost, nor supernatural, but an utterly natural phenomenon.

This is what she explains to an initially death-fearing Laura, preparing her for impending death. Carmilla paints the ideal death: “To die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together. Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes” (270). As yet caterpillars, the girls would blossom into the next stage of maturation together when they have died as lovers “so that they may live together.” This utterly strange sentence denotes that Laura will mature when she is reborn as a vampire instead of reaching womanhood as a human. Boundaries between girl and vampire are further blurred by the wanderer, who calls to Carmilla, informing her that he will saw away at her tooth to make it round instead of sharp so that she may be the “beautiful young lady” (269) that she is. But he himself, as Laura nonchalantly comments, has “white fangs” (267), although his dog howls upon detecting Carmilla. Carmilla, ironically, purchases a charm which is to provide protection against the “oupire” (268). “You may laugh in his face” (268), the wanderer assures the girls. The pronoun he uses here is noticeably not “her.” The boundaries collapse altogether when a small, unframed picture portrait of Mircalla Karnstein dated 1698 appears to be “the effigy of Carmilla!” (272). The portrait’s existence seems to prove that, truly, life imitates art. Carmilla is also the
Laura pronounces the likeness an absolute miracle. However, Laura’s father does not as readily accept or acknowledge a miracle, which would mean accepting that his domestic space has been infiltrated by the contaminated Other – not realizing that his marriage to his wife already implies his affiliation with it. In response to Laura’s rapture, Carmilla replies, “How interesting!” and turns her attention to the “beautiful moonlight!” (273). The reference to the moonlight evokes “the night [Carmilla] came to [the schloss]” (273). But at the same time, the restored portrait’s presence echoes Carmilla’s earlier claim; perhaps Carmilla’s second visit to the schloss is natural, the replacement of something that already belonged there. Laura does not reject Carmilla’s strong declaration of love: “I have been in love with no one, and never shall, unless it should be with you” (273). Instead, she maintains a silence and, like Carmilla, directs her reader’s attention to the moonlight: “How beautiful she looked in the moonlight!” (273). 

Carmilla’s explanation of the laws of her kind, as will come to contrast with that of male characters, includes the story of her own death and rebirth. “I am under vows, no nun half so awfully, and I dare not tell my story yet, even to you. The time is very near when you shall know everything…You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and hating me through death and after” (276), she informs Laura, who, for all of her natural fear for death, seems hardly perturbed by Carmilla’s threatening, loving commands that constantly evoke death.

Within Laura’s narrative, which shies away from closure, Carmilla’s narrative remains open as well. Carmilla recalls that she can remember “everything about it – with an effort...as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium, dense, rippling, but transparent.
There occurred that night what has confused the picture, and made its colours faint. [She] was all but assassinated in [her] bed, wounded here (her breast)” (276). Reminiscent of Laura who remembers her first encounter with Carmilla as an isolated, vague, yet vivid memory, Carmilla remembers the night she was bitten. Memory complicates Laura’s narrative. We cannot forget that Carmilla, the “fiend,” was a human girl at one point. As Laura’s time nears, sleep and reality conflate to the point that consciousness and dreams coexist; Laura claims that she was “quite conscious of being asleep” (278). “It was no such transitory terror as a dream leaves behind it” but rather “seemed to deepen by time, and communicated itself to the room and the very furniture that had encompassed the apparition” (279). Thus, Carmilla is not a transitory ghost that goes away but seeps into the very furniture, as solid as they are. Simultaneously, she is the dream that Laura dreams, filtering “through stone walls, light[ing] up dark rooms, or darken[ing]] light ones, and their persons make their exits and entrances as they please, and laugh at locksmiths” (277). Both solid and permeable, Carmilla’s penetration of the schloss’ walls to shed light on “dark rooms” alludes to her awakening Laura to forbidden desires, and “darkening” Laura’s “innocence,” her lack of knowledge. Only then does the cat-as-Carmilla penetrate Laura’s breast for the second time.

Feeling herself approach death after this second penetration, Laura steadily changes into a girl much more melancholy. Yet, she finds that her newfound melancholy is one that she “would not have interrupted.” In fact, she welcomes thoughts of death that have begun to take place, which “took gentle, and, somehow, not unwelcome, possession of [her]. If it was sad, the tone of mind which this induced was also sweet. Whatever it might be, [her] soul acquiesced in it” (281). Carmilla’s prophecy that death is inevitable and not to be mourned or feared is fulfilled.
Laura’s spirits wane as Carmilla’s ardor increases, and all the meanwhile, she steadfastly refuses to tell her father. Laura, infected with this “disease,” witnesses it deepening in stages. In its initial stages, it fascinates Laura until “it reached a certain point, when gradually a sense of the horrible mingled itself with it, deepening… until it discoloured and perverted the whole state of [her] life” (281). The description of this disease is not unlike Laura’s complicated emotions toward Carmilla; it serves as a parallel for her, interesting and fascinating Laura, while at the same time, it is horrible but natural. Laura’s dreams, nightmares, and reality intermingle, but her languor does not mean that she feels less sharply. In fact, her dreams are all about sensation; she hears a female voice speaking, she feels fear, and she feels the sensation of someone’s hands and lips. When she feels the lips caressing her throat, she describes sensations that resemble strong sexual pleasure: “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, in which my sense left me and I became unconscious” (282).

These reactions are much like Carmilla’s previous amorous embraces and mood swings. Laura claims that had she been aware of her condition, she would have sought aid and advice. Not only does the text’s ending throw this claim into doubt, but throughout her sufferings, she assures her father that she is well. When Laura hears a warning from her mother in a dream, it seems as though her mother is, unlike her father, extending protection to her against Carmilla. However, upon hearing the ambiguous statement, “your mother warns you to beware of the assassin,” Laura wakes up fearing that Carmilla is being murdered. Instead of equating the image of Carmilla bathed in “one great stain of blood” (283) with that of an assassin, Laura views her as the victim. This perception helps us to understand the scene in which the vampire is
decapitated; who is truly the victim in Laura’s perspective? Tammis Elise Thomas states in “Masquerade Liberties and Female Power” that “Laura’s interpretation of her dream presents a decidedly ‘queer’ reading of Carmilla’s nightly visitation sand violent destruction at the hands of General Spielsdorf and his gang of patriarchal protectors of heterosexuality” (60). Laura’s grief is tellingly great, “quite of a different kind” (285) from that of her father when the schloss’ inhabitants discover that Carmilla has gone missing. While earlier, Laura criticizes Carmilla’s spasms of embarrassing passion, upon discovering her companion, she says: “I ran to her in an ecstasy of joy; I kissed and embraced her again and again” (285). With “a sly, dark glance” (286) that Laura observes but does not comment on, Carmilla allows Laura’s father to explain away her absence as sleepwalking. And significantly, this is when occurs the first instance of Laura’s name occurs.

Until she begins to change after the second bite, to the degree that her father notices, her name is not revealed to her reader, as if it is only then that Laura settles into her true identity. Since Laura does not speak of her symptoms until her father solicits the advice of a doctor, the men must diagnose Laura. To male characters, the possibility of desire between Carmilla and Laura is literally unspeakable; they keep Laura in the dark, simply prescribing the antidote, never allowing her to be alone for a moment. Allowing no room for any potential desire between Carmilla or her victim, the livid General declares it monstrous that “Heaven should tolerate… an indulgence of the lusts and malignity of hell” (293). What the General seems to regret most of all is the fact that he no longer may have the luxury of simply rejecting the presence of the vampire like Laura’s father, believing in “nothing but what consists with [his] own prejudices and illusions” (293). Buttressed by the belief that he is avenging his niece, the General’s
determination to “accomplish a pious sacrilege...[to] relieve our earth of certain monsters” blinds him to what he himself narrates: Millarca’s attraction to Bertha was never one-sided. “I never saw anyone more taken with another at first sight, unless, indeed, it was the stranger herself, who seemed quite to have lost her heart to her” (298), he reminisces. Ironically, it is the General to whom Laura’s father wishes to marry his daughter to; hence, his irritation when the General sends news that he will arrive, at a time when Laura is ill and less than “perfectly well to receive him” (291).

The account of Millarca and her mysterious Countess mother do not prompt any quick verbal response from Laura, nor her father. The remarkable coincidences of a fatal mutual attraction, sleepwalking and disappearances through closed doors, a rapid failure of health, nightmares, and a “not unpleasant, but very peculiar” (305) sensation of needles piercing below the throat only elicit Laura’s remark that her reader should guess how “strangely” (305) she felt. Yet, the reader is not quite enabled to know, because she never outwardly entertains thoughts as to whether Carmilla and Millarca are the same. This connection is instead drawn by the General, who implicitly suggests a further association between Laura and the Karnstein vampires, by condemning the Karnsteins as a “bad” family with “atrocious lusts” (305). Would these lusts suggest that they were inherently vampires? History in the text itself is riddled with contradictions; for all of the ancient lineage of the Karnsteins, reinforced by the woodman who is plainly familiar with “revnants” and “usual” tests to detect vampires, doctors constantly seem to suffer ridicule when they blame symptoms on the attacks of a vampire. But Laura, throughout it all, maintains a silence on the subject. In fact, the reader is left confused as to whether Laura does not know or whether she simply refuses to know. The General’s recollection of a black
creature swelling up over his niece’s throat does not evoke horror in Laura, but only relief “on hearing the voices of Carmilla and Madame, who were at that moment approaching” (311).

Does she not harbor suspicion, or does she recognize Carmilla as Millarca – and her acceptance manifests in her intentional silences? As the “beautiful face and figure of Carmilla enter the shadowy chapel” (312), Laura witnesses her companion easily repel an attack by the General, his axe rendered useless by the strength of her small hand. “Begone! May you never behold Carmilla more; you will not find her here” (312), exclaims the General who banishes Carmilla from Laura’s side. With the Baron, Laura’s father, and the woodman, the General succeeds in discovering the monument of Mircalla. Despite the evidence she has been forced to face, Laura’s return home prompts “dismay, on discovering that there were no tidings of Carmilla” (314). The reader can no longer posit the possibility of ignorance. Laura has been informed that Carmilla is Millarca, the vampire who killed the General’s niece, seeing for herself the strength of the beautiful, languorous girl as she faced the General’s axe. Carmilla is also the exact semblance of Mircalla. But Laura tells her reader that “of the scene that had occurred in the ruined chapel, no explanation was offered to [her]” (314). It is questionable as to whether Laura requires an explanation – but her language suggests that Laura perhaps makes the connection between Carmilla and Millarca, but this does not necessary mean that she associates them with the vampire. “The sinister absence of Carmilla made the remembrance of the scene more horrible to me” (314), Laura recalls. It is rendered clear that Carmilla’s presence is only a threat to the male characters; to Laura, the absence is the threat.

“I saw all clearly a few days later” (315), according to Laura, but her statement is not followed by any clarifying explanation. What is it exactly that she sees clearly? For, when she
finally speaks of the vampire, Laura does not call Carmilla by her name. Language related to the vampire is always scientific and formal, the proceedings taken charge by the male characters. They appear to triumph; Countess Mircalla is discovered in a leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed. Here then, were all the admitted signs and proofs of vampirism. The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. (315-6)

The vampire’s body is referred to not by name, but called “the body” and “the vampire.” The vampire figure and Carmilla are distanced further by Laura’s claim that she has “heard no theory by which to explain what [she herself has] witnessed and experienced other than that supplied by the ancient and well-attested belief of the country” (315). This slippery statement indicates that there is no “theory” other than “the ancient and well-attested belief of the country” to properly explain what she has experienced; it is not her own testament. This language of distancing is borrowed from the scientific language of the Baron. According to the Baron’s methodical and theoretical studies, “the vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons” (317) and it will drain the victim after a courtship, “in these cases … [yearning] for something like sympathy and consent” (317), Laura affirms. But she does not draw a parallel between this “courtship” and the relationship between Carmilla and herself. Thus, while seemingly acknowledging the “phenomenon as the Vampire” (315), Laura only mentions the adequate amount of proof provided by the testimony of intelligent “commissions innumerable” with “reports more voluminous perhaps than exist upon any one other class of cases” (316).

Again, left unsaid is the fact that such is not her own testimony, but those of others. She
grants the existence of the vampire due to the vast amount of official paperwork such as “a copy of the report of the Imperial Commission, with the signatures of all who were present at these proceedings” (316), which, importantly, excludes herself. The scene of decapitation is drawn from reports; they are, to her, not reports of Carmilla as she knew her. She states to her reader, “nothing but you earnest desire so repeatedly expressed, could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for months to come, and reinduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific” (316). The reader has desired to listen to this story – it is unspeakable, and it is being spoken by what she does not say to the reader.

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. (319)

The memories of Carmilla alternate between beautiful girl and writhing fiend. But when Laura hears a very real footstep at the drawing-room door, the footstep belongs to the girl she remembers and knows as “Carmilla.”
CHAPTER II Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: Speaking in Wonderland

In all her different and associated forms – underground and through the looking glass, textual and visual, drawn or photographed, as Carroll’s brunette or Tenniel’s blonde or Disney’s prim miss, novel, poem, satire, play, film, cartoon, newspaper, magazine, album cover or song – Alice is the ultimate cultural icon, available for any and every form of manipulation, and as ubiquitous today as in the era of her first appearance Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman 137

Whatever form Alice takes does not last for long in Wonderland. Physically growing up would indicate the death of the child, but Alice certainly remains a child throughout her journey into and out of the rabbit hole. Yet, the threat of death never lingers far away from Alice. She never knows what would happen should she consume a certain liquid, the White Rabbit’s fan causes her to almost vanish altogether, and the Caterpillar implies death during an explanation of metamorphosis. Moreover, the line repeated most by the Queen of Hearts is “Off with their heads!” Thus, we may easily infer that Alice in Wonderland is faced with an onslaught of threats, nonsensical language, and a complete lack of logic that results in her wandering from character to character, equipped with no agency of her own. However, Alice’s own speech is just as nonsensical, deteriorating more and more as she stays in Wonderland. This indicates her participation in the laws that govern a seemingly irrational Wonderland – the laws of nonlogic. When it comes to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Wonderland itself is one of the most popular issues of excitement and much debate. Is it the epitome of discontent and disruptiveness, a reflection of the supposedly more sensible “real” world, a plain and simple dream, or something entirely other?
Drawing from elements of Alice’s entrance and departure (or ejection) from her own dream, I seek to accentuate how the girl heroine’s interaction and speech with otherly characters mesh with her choice to embody the Other that she encounters. For all of Alice’s confusion and ensuing frustration after she falls into and emerges from the rabbit hole to enter Wonderland, it is noteworthy that she herself takes on the very characteristics that she seemingly rejects. She does not question the etiquette and sense of order that were instilled in her via a structure of middle-class English propriety; she applies the same lack (or refusal) of judgment to Wonderland. This sense of both belonging and non-belonging is what perhaps reinforces the threat that appears in the forms of a caterpillar that is not yet a butterfly, and a Cheshire cat which leaves behind only a grinning mouth. The caterpillar, as the larva of a butterfly, is read by some critics as a sexual threat for its phallic shape and physique, for, like Alice, it is on the cusp of maturation, representative in many ways of impending womanhood. While Alice’s changes in shape and size are certainly important, I would like to offer an alternative reading of Alice’s encounter with the caterpillar, applying what we may learn from that scene to the rest of the her encounters with non-human characters. Alice is frustrated and angry, but she is also silent and an avid interpreter and user of language. Although she grows increasingly violent and cannibalistic herself, clearly, she is not a mere victim of uncontrollable madness.

Then, is it possible to posit Alice herself as a threat to what appears to be Other? For what makes Wonderland all the more fascinatingly complex is not only Alice’s perception of that space, but others’ perceptions of her. Exactly what creature is she in Wonderland? Hence, like Laura, Alice becomes somewhat of neither wholly girl nor non-girl. Further, echoing that of Carmilla’s narrator, Alice’s instabilities are not new-founded upon her arrival to Wonderland;
they are already within. We are always aware (and perhaps not quite comfortably so) that Wonderland is presented as a dream – a creation, whether conscious or no, derived by the mind of a young Victorian girl. As Nina Auerbach puts it in her article “Alice in Wonderland: A Curious Child,” “the question ‘who dreamed it?’ underlies all Carroll’s dream tales, part of a pervasive Victorian quest for the origins of the self that culminates in the controlled regression of Freudian analysis. There is no equivocation in Carroll’s first Alice book: the dainty child carries the threatening kingdom of Wonderland within her” (34). This is why the rather abrupt, and tidy ending of the text that sums up by implying that a dream is just a dream cannot alleviate our still troubled questions. Alice is both an innocent girl and threat; these qualities naturally coexist. These fragmented aspects of Alice’s character are more understandable in light of how children were viewed in the Victorian period. As Auerbach explains, “Victorian concepts of the child tended to swing back and forth between extremes of original innocence and original sin; Rousseau and Calvin stood side by side in the nursery. Since actual children were the focus of such an extreme conflict of attitudes, they tended to be a source of pain and embarrassment to adults, and were therefore told they should be “seen and not heard” (44).

Perhaps this is where the necessity of Wonderland emerges; there is no place that would be allocated for an Alice that would shout and rage and utter preposterous, nonsensical sayings in the domestic or social structures of her world. The Alice we come to know is not the nice, obedient Victorian girl that perhaps she feels she ought to be, for all she boasts of her knowledge on etiquette and lessons in Wonderland. That much is obvious to readers of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. While she informs adult readers as to the underlying perceptions and grounds of judgment of the Victorian mind, mostly she depicts what it means for
those systems to fail. “Very fond of pretending to be two people” (11), she does not believe in the “proper” words that fall from her mouth, but shows that she is used to being told what is right and proper, and what is not. According to Christine Roth’s article “Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late Victorian Girlhood: Her Double Perversity,” Victorian anxieties surrounding girl children caused them to be viewed as either pure creatures or degenerate outcasts:

Given the inclination of Victorian social (and medical) science to portray girls as potential agents of degenerate sexuality, even as crusaders depicted them as innocent victims of criminal sexual assault, the hyper-sensitivity and sensationalism surrounding such exposes as the “Maiden Tribute” series led most Victorian readers to consider the possibility that all thirteen- to sixteen-year-old “daughters,” working-class and middle-class alike, might somehow be both ethereal children and sexually active young women. (161-162)

What Alice takes with her to Wonderland is the possibilities of neither classification. She looks for rules not due to a moralistic set of beliefs, but as a habit grounded into children of her time. But even this habit Alice inverts. She looks for the rules that govern the place, not to obey them, but to recognize them only to later disrupt the hierarchal society they represent. From what she listens to and infers in Wonderland, she deciphers the “rules” of nonlogic that govern Wonderland.

For Alice, reading is not the equivalent of reading a book. Curiously, written and spoken language appear to exist on different dimensions for her. In fact, the act of reading words means little to Alice, who questions, “What is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?” (7). Perhaps this is why it she is subsumed into Wonderland’s way of speaking with little difficulty – she does not depend on a fixed system of words or linguistic structure to grasp meaning. When a speaking Rabbit flits by her, she thinks nothing of it, though afterwards “it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this” (7). It is when it actually looks at a watch it pulls out from
its waistcoat pocket that she is alerted to something not quite fitting. This is curious in itself. Supposedly, language is what distinguishes humans from animals. For Alice, clearly, that is not the case. Language is not delegated to the possession of only humans: rabbits may well be her equal. Perhaps that is the more natural state of mind for Alice. In the next instant, we see Alice flying down a large rabbit-hold, “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again” (7). From the onset of her adventures, the narrator implicates the reader in Alice’s train of thought through her methods of speech and interpretation. A certain rhythm and nonsensical humor develops rather rapidly – in the first six short paragraphs alone there are seven “very[s].” Alice’s understanding and usage of language hence bleed into the reader, who is implicated in a relation with Alice’s world(s).

In practical terms, it would matter as to whether she were indeed “four thousand miles down” (8) the center of the earth, and what “Latitude or Longitude” she has reached. But these scientific terms taught in the classroom which should supposedly enlighten Alice as to her situation are only “nice grand words to say” (8). Even before she is in Wonderland proper, her linguistic capabilities muddle. However, up to here, in a kind of limbo, she finds it a relief that no one is witness to her mistakes (“she was rather glad there was no one listening” (8) ), whereas the more she progresses in Wonderland, the less it begins to matter as to whether she utters words correctly or not. It may be unfair to insist that Alice “lets go” of her previous world because she jumps into the rabbit hold without any hesitation or misgivings whatsoever. Moreover, her ties to home are manifest. “How brave they’ll all think me at home!” (7), Alice muses. But “home” for Alice is strange indeed. Even the seemingly common sense knowledge that she possesses, such as that one must not hold a red-hot poker, cut one’s finger with a knife,
or drink poison, are gathered from books about children. As such, home is not about order, parental guidance, and rules, but rather the lack thereof. Like le Fanu’s Laura, Alice seems to lack a mother; indeed, the domestic structure she invokes seems more or less to exist as the form of a cat. This is not a sweet little kitten either; Dinah is a predatory cat who likes mice and perhaps bats. When Alice later trembles face to face with a playful puppy, a parallel connects him with Dinah, eliciting the question: Would not Dinah snack on miniscule Alice too?

Under the protection or guidance of no adult, Alice learns that she must survive in a crude manner: by staying at or near the top of the food chain. Alice herself is unconsciously predatory from the start. Recalling the words to a poem, she imagines a little crocodile who cheerfully and smirkingly invites fish to enter his jaws. To the “French” mouse she encounters while swimming amongst other Wonderland creatures, Alice offensively questions, “Ou est ma chatte?” (16). Their conversation grows violent with Alice speaking of Dinah’s great abilities to catch mice and a bright-eyed terrier that kills rats. In relation to this seeming violent aggression, in her article “Little Girls Without Their Curls: Female Aggression in Victorian Children’s Literature,” U.C. Knoepflmacher states that:

the aggression that Alice meets in Wonderland mirrors her own repressed anarchism, an anarchism suggested by her repeated identification with the predatory cat Dinah, who kills bats and mice and birds; it is Alice’s long-suppressed outburst of anger at her primary female rival, the Queen of Hearts, that finally dissolves her dream and returns her to an unquestioning world of teacups and governesses. (15)

Certainly, Alice is disenchanted with her “world of teacups and governesses,” endless lessons and books without pictures. But in addition to that, I would like to suggest that Alice’s verbal violence, rather than depicting female suppression, is somewhat of a practical adaptation process. The lesson she learns is simple: she required the aid of a mouse who did not, like her, harbor a
liking for cats and dogs. Therefore, she must not speak of cats killing mice. In fact, Alice’s understanding and sympathy for the mouse portrays her quick and instinctive adaptation to Wonderland. Before entering Wonderland, Alice is made to pass the test of size and shape. Wonderland will not admit a normal-sized Alice; hence, the doors round the hallway which connects the rabbit hole to Wonderland are all locked, save for one which is only fifteen inches high. Alice pokes her head out of that door to get a glimpse of an Eden-like garden. She does not shut up like a telescope or go out like a candle, but consumes liquids and cakes that respectively shrink and increase her size. “Curiouser and curiouser!” (13), she cries out, which is, according to an increasingly unreliable narrator, an instance of her quite forgetting “how to speak good English” (13), as if this is the first time such an event has occurred.

Alice’s change in size reflects her lack of control over her own body, also accentuated by her fear that her feet will not “walk the way [she] want[s] to go” (13), and in addition, parallels her incapability to speak in what she deems to be “good” or grammatically correct English (regardless of whether this is true). “What nonsense I’m talking!” (13), she deplores. With this loss of language as she previously knew it, Alice’s extreme heights delineate her state of fluctuation – precariously situated between girlhood and womanhood – but also a certain loss of her sexuality. It reveals that she can be either too tall or too small; what is more, to be the “right” size is entirely dependent on the situation, and is highly like to change. As such, Wonderland demands that Alice strip herself of her sexuality and identity before she can enter its grounds. By this, I do not mean that Alice is non-sexual while she is in Wonderland, but that “normalized” ideas of a Victorian girl’s sexuality are denaturalized, just as her original size is. Therefore, naturally, she loses all sense of self-identity with rapidity. Wonderland’s dangers derive not from
its inhabitants, but from an affiliation with the place and its denizens which challenges and
inverts previous knowledge and systems of communication. Photographs depicting versions of
Alice range from the girl holding a pig to a girl who is obviously “pure” and angel-like. This
issue is not so far off from the one that I previously address; that of vampire and victim. Is Laura
a victim from the perspective of Carmilla?

Similarly, must Alice be rescued from Wonderland before she wanders in too deep, for
too long? Why must she, in these photos, be segregated from too-deep relations with non-human
characters? These questions may be answered in part by her first real identity crisis which
commences when she declares that “it’ll be no use their putting their heads down and saying
‘Come up again, dear!’ I shall only look up and say ‘Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then,
if I like being that person, I’ll come up: if not, I’ll stay down here till I’m somebody else!” (15).
Alice’s previous lessons in mathematics and multiplication cannot help her to determine whether
she is another child or herself, and if she is herself, what that signifies. Only then (and with the
help of the rabbit’s fan) is she permitted to shrink to the right size and enter Wonderland, not
through the door but by swimming through the tears she has shed. And reaching its shores, she
begins to relearn language, her first teacher being the mouse who insists that he will dry off
everyone by telling them the “driest thing [he] know[s]” (18). This is not a lesson readily learnt,
and another reference to the world above the rabbit hole, Dinah, causes her to be left by the
various birds and mice among whose company she is in. But the next time Dinah is mentioned,
Wonderland and the outer world begin to blend. Alice imagines a talking Dinah, their roles
reverse, and it is Dinah who demands that Alice get ready for her walk and Alice who replies
that she will see to it that the mouse does not escape.
Simultaneously, she runs errands for a rabbit. Although she is taken by surprise, as she is addressed by the name Mary Ann, she responds readily to this character who finds Alice to be very much a part of the Wonderland environment. She again consumes a liquid which causes her to grow to an uncomfortable height. She laments that

It was much pleasanter at home, when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole – and yet – and yet – it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life!...When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!...but I’m grown up now...at least there’s no room to grow up any more here. (25)

Placed in a strange position, Alice is all at once “grown up,” in a fairy-tale within a fairy-tale, physically fluctuating, and in either an equal or lower social status than animals. She is torn when she contemplates on her fate. “Shall I never get any older than I am now? That’ll be a comfort, one way – never to be an old woman – but then – always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn’t like that!” (25). Again, her two worlds are conflated. When she emphasizes “here,” that could be a reference both to the rabbit’s home and to Wonderland. In Wonderland, she would indeed refrain from growing up. But if she remains a girl, Alice rather confusingly concludes that she must engage in never-ending lessons. According to Roth, “London scandals like the Stead and Newton cases also encouraged Victorians to regard little girls as paradoxical figures of virtue and sin” (163). Alice is both little and not-little throughout the text, and in the context of Victorian England, the juxtaposition of her enormous height and little-girl mentality is eerily reminiscent of men (including Carroll) who idolized and immortalized little girls, and who presumably did not wish them to mature physically:

Students and professors treated daughters of middle-class dons in ways that made the cultish fascination with little girls as carnally fixating as it was abstractly idealizing.
Girls were immortalized as beatific icons in poems, stories, and artwork by men at Oxford, but apparently they were also present as mascots during sporting events and sought after for private tea parties and walks. John Ruskin competed with Charles Dodgson for tea parties with Alice Liddell, the famous Dean’s daughter at Christ Church College, and Ruskin describes his despair after losing an evening completely alone with her by writing that ‘there was a sudden sense of some stars having been blown out by the wind.’ Like many men associated with this ‘cult of the little girl,’ he associated his child pet with ethereal, celestial forces – in this case, stars and wind – but his disappointment and despair stemmed from his inability to spend intimate time physically close to her. The girls were celebrated as ideals, but they were also pursued and adored as physically alluring bodies. They were both angels and paramours, knowing young women as well as innocent children. (163)

In the midst of Alice’s identity crisis, perhaps one of the most perplexing, challenging, yet enlightening (for Alice) characters in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is the caterpillar. This hookah smoking, languid caterpillar repeatedly questions Alice, “Who are you?” (31). Alice is unable to answer in lucid terms, politely explaining that “I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir, because I’m not myself, you see” (31). Her answer is not greeted with any kind or understanding demeanor on part of the caterpillar. But Alice has perhaps explained herself better than she (and the caterpillar) realizes. Alice does not say what she is with conviction, but her acceptance of her fluctuating (non) identity and crumbling previous knowledge is evident. Clearly, the heroine’s queered language and inverted linguistic meanings do not denote childish ignorance, but an acknowledgment of her not knowing. Thus, I would like to suggest that not knowing in Alice, in a sense, indicates one’s knowing more than meets the eye. She is given the power to experiment; the caterpillar challenges Alice to master the elements of the mushroom; ultimately, Alice must decide on what size she wishes to be and stay in. When she sprouts until her head pops up among some trees, it is with some doubt that Alice informs an agitated mother pigeon that she is not a serpent, but “a little girl” (36). To this, the pigeon replies that if little girls eat eggs, “then they’re
a kind of serpent” (36) as well. This seemingly airtight logic renders Alice mute for a minute or two. And, as Auerbach also points out, the heroine’s silence speaks to the reader who must recognize what is to be deciphered. She further finds that

In this scene, the golden child herself becomes the serpent in childhood’s Eden. The eggs she eats suggest the woman she will become, the unconscious cannibalism involved in the very fact of eating and desire to eat, and finally, the charmed circle of childhood itself. Only in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland was Carroll able to fall all the way through the rabbit hole to the point where top and bottom become one, bats and cats melt into each other, and the vessel of innocence and purity is also the source of inescapable corruption. (41)

Indeed, eggs suggest notions of female fertility, and girls, serpents, and caterpillars also “melt into each other.” But I would like to question whether the simultaneous dichotomy and association between girl and serpent should indicate potential corruption. I am not arguing that Alice is not a “vessel of innocence and purity,” but the way in which these adjectives are put to use. While she is certainly far from faultless, it is not her attainment of knowledge and understanding of Wonderland’s erratic violence and structures that is the “corruption.” Rather, Carroll’s text always questions: is Alice the victim in Wonderland, or is she an active participant and creator (though she already is, in a sense) of a corrupt Wonderland? Is Carroll’s supposedly violent cannibalism the corruption at all? In this light, terms such as “innocent” and “pure” that are applied to Victorian girl children must be reconsidered. A feminine version of Alice does make an appearance at the Duchess’ household, which turns inside out the domesticated Wordsworthian ideal. Domestic violence is the “norm,” with food and the baby being hit and flung about at once; it could not be further from pastoral peace and tranquility. In contrast, Alice cares for the baby who is howling in pain. “If I don’t take this child away with me, they’re sure
to kill it in a day or two: wouldn’t it be murder to leave it behind?” (42), Alice ponders.

But the grunting baby turns out to be a pig, which trots away into the woods when she lets it go. Alice concludes that it is a “dreadfully ugly child,” but “rather a handsome pig” (43). It is an interesting moment of contrast; when she had been carrying the “child,” she had been a potential wife and mother with natural maternal instincts. But in her arms, the child is revealed to be an animal which will eat just about anything; what is more, Alice ponders children she knows who “might do very well as pigs” (43). As Carmilla and Laura’s embrace functions so that the girls perform roles of mother, daughter, and lover at once, Alice and the pig-baby’s dynamics suggest dangerously that girl and pig are interchangeable. In effect, Alice’s comparison to the “evil” serpent does not carry more significance than that to a pig. Carroll’s text does not allow the reader to comfortably categorize Alice as either a heroine preparing for maternity or a predatory creature. Like other little girls in Victorian literature, Alice is not an “innocent” child, nor does she mature into a woman. But she is significantly different from female protagonists of Victorian literature who are “fallen” or “good.” Alice’s identity crisis does not indicate a lack of development; with every encounter, she learns about inverted language and meanings in Wonderland.

The Cheshire Cat, which invokes Dinah’s presence as well as that of the caterpillar, is the only creature to make explicit to Alice the madness of Wonderland that has infected her as well. “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad” (44) the Cat announces matter-of-factly. “How do you know I’m mad?” questions Alice, to which the Cat answers, “You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here.” The Cat is also the only character in Wonderland who is fully aware of its own madness, regardless of why it believes itself to be so. Although Alice is not convinced
that she, too, is mad, her conversation with the Cat may provide clues to her self-identity. For Alice, growing accustomed to strange occurrences happening around her depicts a growing affiliation with Wonderland and its madness. As the Cat’s tail and body disappears, its grin remains. And something of that grin remains within Alice. As Auerbach suggests, “the core of Alice's nature, too, seems to lie in her mouth: the eating and drinking that direct her size changes and motivate much of her behavior, the songs and verses that pop out of her inadvertently, are all involved with things entering and leaving her mouth” (39). Alice’s changes in size and shape occur when she drinks and eats liquids and cakes, she speaks of cannibalism, and her greatest and deepest connection/transformation in Wonderland occurs by means of the inverted language she utilizes.

In fact, the more Wonderland creatures she encounters, and the more she penetrates into the core of Wonderland, the more obsessed she becomes with the mouth and language, including her “great interest in questions of eating and drinking” (50-51). “The Hatter’s remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English” (48), she remarks at the Mad Tea Party. But Alice has learned, and she is perhaps wiser. When she finds herself in the long hall once again, she takes possession of the golden key before she starts gnawing at the mushroom again. Finally, she achieves her initial goal: she is in the beautiful Eden-like garden. Ironically, it is here that Alice must face what critics have dubbed her greatest female rival. The Queen is the figure that all – including her husband – fear. Alice fears her the less, for while she is initially polite to this threatening figure, she also reminds herself “Why, they’re only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!” (57). These pack of cards genuinely seem to tremble in the presence of their Queen; however, Alice comes to realize that the beheading business is pretense,
and no one actually loses his or her head. Even before she is given this information, though, Alice’s awareness that they are only cards gives her the courage to confront the Queen when asked a question. “How should I know?” said Alice, surprised at her own courage. ‘It’s no business of mine’ ”(57). Strangely, she is most verbally outspoken and aggressive towards the matriarch who appears to possess the most power in Wonderland. She openly rebels, replying to the infuriated Queen’s shout of “Off with her head!” with a loud and decided “nonsense!”

Perhaps this is, as critics have purported, Alice’s anger and outburst against a domestic household in which a young girl is raised to become a good mother and wife, echoed through the violence of the Queen. More than that, Alice becomes diplomatic, even downright cunning, in the Queen’s presence. “She’s so extremely likely to win, that it’s hardly worth while finishing the game” (59), she states disingenuously to the Cheshire Cat. In light of Alice’s earlier outburst, it is safe to assume that Alice’s flattery does not stem from her fear of losing her head. Nor is Alice purely aggressive towards the Queen. Rather, Alice is the one character in Wonderland who appreciates the Queen’s savagery and control over her subject. This is why she shouts to the Queen she herself is shouted at during the croquet game. Through her changes in size and shape, Alice’s self-identity has fragmented to slowly piece itself together again through the perspectives of a Mouse, a Caterpillar, a Pigeon, a pig, a Cheshire Cat, and finally, the Queen. The Duchess addresses a wiser Alice: “You’re thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can’t tell you just now what the moral of that is …Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it” (63). Alice’s response is that perhaps that is not necessarily true; nonetheless the Duchess finds a moral to preach to her. “‘Be what you would seem to be’ – or if you’d like it put more simply – ‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others
that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise’ ” (64).

Of course, the second version is what Alice declares she would understand “better” should it have been written down. Perhaps Victorian girl heroines learn moral, virtuous lessons while they do not necessarily mature; clearly, Alice is the opposite. Alice pre-Wonderland found the written word much less interesting than pictures, whereas nearing the ending of her dream, she finds herself wanting to read. Hints of the home above the rabbit hole begin to emerge in the courtroom, where Alice remembers a bowl of goldfish she had upset at home when she tips over the jurybox with the edge of her skirt due to her growth spurt, “for the accident of the goldfish kept running in her head, and she had a vague sort of idea that they must be collected at once and put back into the jury-box, or they would die” (83). But Alice evidently does not wish to leave quite yet; she argues with king and refuses to leave the courtroom. But logic interferes with her desires to remain. Wonderland is more or less lawless, with verdicts drawn from the whim of the Queen and King. Because Alice is beginning to find some value in written language, the King’s judgment on the matter of the Knave’s (non) signature infuriates her. “ ‘If you didn’t sign it,’ said the King, ‘that only makes the matter worse. You must have meant some mischief, or else you’d have signed your name like an honest man’ ” (85). Eventually, Alice bursts out “stuff and nonsense! The idea of having a sentence first!” (87), to which the Queen screams again, “Off with her head!” The rules are that there are no rules, and the more “evidence” is presented, the more Alice finds it a world gone mad, spinning out of control to the degree that the text must end with the conclusion that it was all a dream.

And Alice awakes with her head in the lap of her sister. “Oh, I’ve had such a curious
dream!” (88) she exclaims. Alice has been restored to logic, etiquette, and propriety. Yet, the ending leaves us with a sense of discontent. It is an ending that purposes to be an ending, interfering into the plot (or as a plot device) at just the right moment. It purposes to clear up the air, resolving any knots of madness that linger. And more significantly, the tidy resolution is pushed into place by Alice’s sister who replies that “it WAS a curious dream, dear, certainly: but now run in to your tea; it’s getting late” (88). Alice, like Laura, like Carmilla, is given no voice. It is her sister who ultimately appears to restore domesticity and propriety by invoking images of Alice and her fertility, images of her future family with children.

Regarding the ending of Alice, Catherine Robson comments that:

This is one of the moments of anticlimactic conventionality in Wonderland’s final pages; the sister’s saccharine celebration of Alice’s ‘simple and loving heart’ certainly rings false to those of us who have enjoyed our heroine’s various displays of curiosity, timorousness, tactlessness, snobbery petulance, self-aggrandizement, and downright bad temper in the preceding twelve chapters. Only in Wonderland’s frame, constricted by either the real presence of her elder sister or the imagined presence of her own adult self, is Alice limited to the performance of … angelically innocent childishness. (148)

According to Robson, the “anticlimactic” finale reflects Carroll’s method of creating a still scene which mimics the photograph, which allows us participate in voyeurism, as we steadily gaze “at the little girl in repose.” Alice is diminished to an object to gaze at; Wonderland to a nonsensical dream. Carroll, as is well known, was highly interested in discovering new little girls to photograph. It is says that the number of girls amounted to hundreds, even thousands. His photographs do not film stiff, unreal subjects, but they encapsulate the personalities of his subjects. Some of his photographs are erotic and alluring, almost as if his subjects would speak provocatively to us. But this ending, neatly framed by Alice’s sister, allows no room for Alice to speak further. I, too, find this to be an anticlimactic ending to a text that presents to the reader a
fantastical sphere of inverted meanings, dangerously logical nonsense, and the intensely brilliant
lights of a wondrous land. This is why I would like to re-examine this ending, where Alice’s
sister lingers after Alice, remaining until she, too, begins to dream. She is not the antithesis to
Alice; she dreams of her younger sister’s voice until “the whole place around her became alive
[with] the strange creatures of her little sister’s dream.” Carroll does not give this older sister a
name, and perhaps she remains nameless for good reason. Hovering between the spheres of
Wonderland and its borders, at the edge of a dream “she sat on, with closed eyes, and half
believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would
change to dull reality.” Her peculiar nostalgia and familiarity with Wonderland raises the
question: Is this the conventional, mature, maternal grown-up that we imagine her to be at the
text’s beginning?

The nameless sister’s final speech is the most problematic aspect to the text’s
conclusion:

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time,
be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the
simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little
children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even
with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple
sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-
life, and the happy summer days. (88-89)

This is an ending that strongly evokes the ending of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,”
published in 1862:

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;
Laura would call the little ones
   And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
   Of not-returning time.

Where are the men in this idyllic, pastoral scene of domesticity and familial joys? Throughout the text, with the exception of the King and Queen, not once are (human) parents or husbands mentioned. Alice is a child, and she runs off after expressing joy at having had such a marvelous dream. It is left to her sister to lament the dream. Like *Carmilla*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is but half-framed in its narrative. *Carmilla’s* beginning and *Alice’s* ending are framed respectively by characters other than the protagonist. And *Alice’s* framed ending fails to assert a true foresight as to Alice’s domesticized, tamed future, just as *Carmilla’s* framed beginning fails to assert authority.
Conclusion

“How do you know I’m mad?” asks Lewis Carroll’s Alice. The answer: “You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here.” Like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, recent film adaptations like Twilight and TV series Grimm and True Blood address bodies and their borders in narratives that would be at home in the Victorian period. Manifestations of vampires and otherly creatures, and seemingly “unnatural” girl heroines, have always existed in literature. But these vampires and protagonists thwart the very idea of drawing a distinction between natural and unnatural desire, innocence and contamination. Today’s heroines are more outspoken in their transgressive desires to approach, and even embody, the forbidden unknown. Among the more noticeable, Twilight’s heroine, Bella, does not desire anything more than to be bitten by her boyfriend, a vampire – meaning that she, too, would be “reborn” as one of that species. In her world, vampires are perceived as much more than blood-thirsty predators. Through her eyes, vampires are illustrated as talented, sympathetic, intelligent, and highly proper figures. And the success of the series has divided its enthusiastic fans into two camps, Team Edward and Team Jacob, as its fans are torn between the two main male characters, the vampire and the werewolf. Its popularity has bled into media to culminate in an onslaught of television series focused on non-human characters.

Why do vampires, werewolves, and monsters live on to this day, thriving perhaps more than ever? Perhaps the answer is obvious – they are aesthetically beautiful. More significantly, why the desire to be bitten, the desire to become affiliated into the sphere of the Other? In today’s cultural representations, the vampire is no longer the flapping bat or sinister Count
Dracula of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. It is someone utterly desirable, something that the girl would like to be herself. In the most recent and last film of the *Twilight* saga, Bella announces provocatively: “I was born to be a vampire.” Clearly, the perspective of the girl complicates matters; she does not categorize the vampire as an undead being in her collapse of birth and death. Her desire to become one herself, in effect, prevents her body from being located as a site of victimization. More than that, her vampiric union (in addition to her vampiric rebirth, she marries a vampire) is doubly complemented by her daughter, a half-human, half-vampire girl. The potential possibilities that the vampire species open for bodies and identities has, most noticeably, diminished aspects of the threat they traditionally embody. However, this potential, and the species’ affiliation with girl heroines, stem from a longer literary tradition.

In this thesis, I have examined the relations between the girl heroine and non-human creatures in Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. These 19th-century British texts are by no means the first literary instances of ghosts, vampires, or monsters, but their girl protagonists are unique in their embodiment of otherness that manifests through a peculiar narrative of silences and intentional gaps. In many ways, popular culture today reproduces the narratives of such heroines who challenge the very structures of narrative form, and ideas of victimization and vampirism. Significantly, unlike today’s heroines, they do not appear to voice their desires. However, in my thesis, I have challenged the notion that not speaking is the equivalent to repression, or “what cannot be spoken.” Language is rendered slippery by Carroll’s and le Fanu’s heroines; what is not spoken translates to knowledge intentionally withheld from the reader, and even what is spoken cannot be taken at face value, or troubles the narrative form and overarching frame of the texts. Hence, I posit that veiled
knowledge, queered spaces, and inverted language enact as sites of empowerment in *Carmilla* and *Alice*. Branching from scholarship on Victorian childhood and psychoanalytic theory, I have problematized the dangerous “unspeakable,” that which cannot be named, dubbing it instead “what *will* not be named.”

Scientific discourses that prevailed in the 19th century fail to police and rationalize what appear to be aberrant and perverse desires. In fact, desire itself is “infectious” and inherent at once. “I almost wish I hadn’t gone down the rabbit-hole – and yet – and yet” is a line that could be uttered by both Laura and Alice. Such language depicts that lingering, material affect of otherness permeates domestic, social, and political structures, rendering identity fluid. As textual fissures suggest points of bodily transformation, relations between the girl heroine and non-human characters transcend mere eroticization. Transgressions unspoken, un-condemned and unresolved, I argue, locate fluctuations in the boundaries of the girl’s malleable body and identity. Suggestive that the performance of naming and categorizing itself reductive, in the context of these texts, concepts of vampirism and victimization, knowledge and innocence, and the acts of reading and partial narration must be reimagined. In their manipulation of language and narrative silences, Laura and Alice engage and implicate the reader in their exploration of identity and sexuality. Their narratives do not end on a conclusive note, but are somehow probing and circular, asking us to question: What do we make of a narrative that refuses to name altogether, refusing to even that which it does not name? Surely, their performances indicate, a refusal to speak paired with a selective narrative that imparts only what the narrator wishes to, creates an infection by means of the very act of reading; a narrative that functions as a bite itself.
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