

How are women villainised for not conforming to patriarchal ideals in *Carmilla* and *Rebecca*?

The Gothic genre became popular among female readers as it allowed them to explore and subvert the restricted patriarchal norms of their society, making them feel empowered through heroines that challenged the norm. Typically, the presentation of women varied in Gothic texts ranging from timid, innocent women that conformed to patriarchal standards to confident, outspoken women that expressed independence. Women who defied the patriarchy suffered either physically or psychologically through their husbands, family or society itself. I would define female Gothic as literature that aligns itself with a traditional Gothic plot with complex female characters. The Gothic represented ‘excess and exaggeration, [...] [in] a world that constantly tended to overflow [with] cultural boundaries.’¹ Both Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) and Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) focus on gender, elements of the supernatural and the connection between the past and present which are Gothic plotlines that transgress ‘cultural boundaries.’ Le Fanu’s ‘*Carmilla* is considered to be the first lesbian vampire story’ published to a society Le Fanu considered to be an ‘insane system of repression of control.’² *Carmilla* influenced vampire texts like *Dracula* which followed the Gothic convention of foreign settings and heroines at risk likewise seen in *Carmilla*. Whereas Du Maurier published *Rebecca* when society in the 20th century experienced change. Erin Spellman informs that: ‘Challenges to traditional gender roles and sexuality begin to arise with the emergence of the feminist and gay and lesbian movements. Daphne du Maurier explores the anxieties surrounding these social changes.’³ Gothic conventions, such as heroines at risk, are seen throughout *Rebecca* by presenting ‘Maxim de Winter, the patriarch [...] as the new villain’ and the women in the novel falling victim to him.⁴ The novels display the spectrum of womanhood, specifically through characters like Laura, Carmilla, Rebecca and the narrator in *Rebecca* who I will refer to as Mrs de Winter. It is worth to mention that these characters did not conform to patriarchal ideals at some point and the consequences ranged depending on how far they transgressed. *Carmilla* and *Rebecca* did not conform to the status quo, therefore were punished through

¹ David Punter. Glennis Byron, *The Gothic*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 7.

² Punter, Byron. *The Gothic*, 138.

³ Erin Spellman, “Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*: A Cautionary Tale against Villainous Women,” University of Central Oklahoma ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (2024): 1.

⁴ Auba Llompart Pons, “Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier’s “*Rebecca*,”” *Atlantis* 35, no. 1 (2013): 72.

death compared to Laura and Mrs de Winter who are suffering in the present but live to tell the tale. In this essay I will compare these novels and how women are vilified through psychological fragility, sexuality, autonomy and religion in relation to the female Gothic genre.

Firstly, I argue that womanhood is a wide spectrum and the women who conformed to the patriarchy were not vilified as much. The protagonist of Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Laura narrates the story in the present but reverts to the past by creating the link between the past and the present, an example of a fractured Gothic plotline. The fractured gothic plotline is a narrative technique used by writers to express unreliable storytelling to emphasise psychological impact and create uncertainty within a character, this also creates tension in the atmosphere. We see the impact the events have had on Laura as she says: 'I write all this you suppose with composure. But far from it; I cannot think of it without agitation.'⁵ Le Fanu sets the novel in the 19th century, an era that emphasised the 'ideal' yet restrictive expectations of women and also the importance for men to protect women because of fatal consequences. Laura is preyed upon by Carmilla, a vampire, moulding her into the perfect victim, a common trope in Victorian Gothic fiction and suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result. Aycan Gökçek writes that: 'men used to believe that it was their duty to protect women from sexuality.'⁶ Laura's father partially failed in protecting his daughter from Carmilla and these events psychologically impacted Laura as she was unable to recover from the memories and can only feel 'agitation.' He did not fail fully as Laura did not die like the General's daughter, Bertha. Although Laura did not initiate the homoerotic relationship with Carmilla, she still engaged despite knowing the unnaturalness of the bond. She admits: 'It was like the ardour of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering.'⁷ Le Fanu uses simile to compare Carmilla's affection towards Laura to a lovers' emphasising the intensity of their relationship. The juxtaposition signifies Laura's complex feelings towards Carmilla's advances because she knows it's abnormal yet cannot resist. Laura's awareness of their relationship is evident as she was 'conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence.'⁸

⁵ Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, (Google: Google Books, 1872), 90

⁶ Aycan Gökçek, "Social Position of Victorian Women: Villette and Emma," *Comparative Literature East & West* 4, no. 2 (2020): 145.

⁷ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 28.

⁸ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 28.

Laura's role in engaging partially subverts patriarchal norms by being complicit and expressing pleasure alongside fear when she is with Carmilla. This way Laura has transgressed against the norms and is punished by experiencing PTSD in comparison to Carmilla, who was punished through death. I will elaborate further on the transgression of women's sexuality in relation to Carmilla later in the essay. Furthermore, Laura strays from patriarchal standards by developing autonomy regarding sexual identity. Although Laura's experience was traumatic, I argue that it altered her perception of sex because she found female sexual relationships more rewarding sometimes than traditional expectations because she confesses: 'I felt myself a changed girl.'⁹ However, Laura could not express this to anyone because women in the Victorian period 'were expected to repress their sexualities. [...] it was inappropriate for a woman to comment on sexuality in the 19th century.'¹⁰ Laura is isolated in a schloss before she is introduced to Carmilla, therefore she never had a chance to establish a close bond with men or women. This reinforces the Gothic idea that evil can be subtle and hidden behind affection especially through isolation, an example of Gothic plotline. Alison Milbank supports this view as she says: 'Radcliffian Whig Gothic elements are seen throughout Le Fanu's work, such as the 'the entrapped heroine.'¹¹ Here, I argue that Laura is the entrapped heroine as she needed rescuing from Carmilla, however I believe that Carmilla freed Laura from a limited perspective regarding sexuality. Laura's inability to progress mentally is a symptom of PTSD reflecting and revealing the social anxieties of transgression against cultural norms in Victorian society.

We see the same narrative technique in Rebecca however; the narrator remains unnamed. Du Maurier deliberately chooses not to name the narrator to foreshadow the identity crises Mrs de Winter faces after being compared to Rebecca constantly. To add to this, after she marries Maxim, she is referred to as Mrs de Winter which further makes the narrator feel like she cannot fulfil the roles and expectations of being Maxim's wife as Rebecca did. Du Maurier does this to hint early at Mrs de Winter's mental vulnerability. At the start of their relationship Mrs de Winter timidly tries to categorise herself as the ideal wife. Later in the novel, she admits: 'How lovely it was to be alone again. No, I did not mean that. It was disloyal, wicked. It

⁹ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 48.

¹⁰ Gökçek, "Social Position," 145.

¹¹ Alison Milbank, "The Victorian Gothic in English novels and stories," in *The Cambridge Companions to Gothic Fiction*, eds. J. E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145.

was not what I meant. Maxim was my life and my world.’¹² The novel illustrates internal conflict and insecurities Mrs de Winter experiences, affecting her mental health and impacts her behaviour. Simply believing autonomy was more rewarding than being a wife shows Mrs de Winter’s slight transgression. To add to this, readers can understand that Mrs de Winter has a traditional mindset regarding marriage as she centres her life on Maxim. However, the events of the novel enable Mrs de Winter to change from being insecure to a complex woman through psychological liberation seen when she realises that Maxim resented Rebecca. Mrs de Winter commits the immoral act of defending a murderer; therefore, she is not exactly vilified but punished by being stuck in a bleak, unfulfilling marriage with Maxim. In *Rebecca*, the absence of an omniscient narrator affects the storyline because we are getting the perspective of the unnamed narrator who’s clearly mentally unwell. For example, after she marries Maxim, Du Maurier displays her imaginative episodes. Maxim reacts and explains: ‘First you listened [...], then your lips moved, and you threw a half-glance at me. And you shook your head, and smiled, and shrugged your shoulders. [...] You look like a little criminal.’¹³ Furthermore, another example of Mrs de Winter’s psychological fragility is shown when Mrs Danvers encourages Mrs de Winter to jump out of the window. Through mere words of encouragement, the protagonist contemplates death when she says: ‘the pain would be sharp and sudden [...] The fall would break my neck.’¹⁴ This highlights the mental suffering Mrs de Winter experienced through the events that occurred at Manderley. The unreliable narrator allows readers to become immersed in the narrator’s disturbed psyche. The novel demonstrates the Gothic expectation of female identity, which is Coventry Patmore’s *Angel in the House* (1854) archetype.¹⁵ Du Maurier uses the rigid expectations to create suspense and arising confusions hidden within women to subtly critique the patriarchy. Mrs de Winter gains confidence after learning the truth about Rebecca however, this confidence is only achieved by being complicit in Maxim’s crime. This suggests that within patriarchy, women may only escape instability mentally and socially by aligning themselves with male power, ultimately surrendering autonomy.

¹² Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago, 2015), 170.

¹³ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 225.

¹⁴ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 277.

¹⁵ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, in *The Angel in the House*, ed. by Henry Morley (London: Cassell & Company, 1887)

Therefore, I believe Du Maurier has used an effective Gothic display of highlighting psychological instability as a result of patriarchal restrictions.

Du Maurier continues to present Mrs de Winter's psychological vulnerability through her feelings of inadequacy, produced by patriarchal oppression. The Gothic genre often explored madness and the protagonists' fragility reflects how patriarchal power structures destabilise female identity. Mrs de Winter fears to be overshadowed by Rebecca because she believes Rebecca is the ideal wife, so she internalises patriarchal standards and measures herself against Rebecca. This manifests into a physical and psychological haunting. Mrs de Winter's fear and obsession grow, and she begins to withdraw into herself seen in her imaginative episodes, which aligns with a Gothic trope of the 'madwoman' who is perceived as unstable. Rebecca becomes an omniscient presence felt by Mrs de Winter, Maxim and Mrs Danvers, almost like a vampire as she plagues Mrs de Winter's mind. This increases Mrs de Winter's anxiety and is reinforced when she admits: 'Perhaps I haunted her as she haunted me.'¹⁶ Diana Wallace informs that: 'The Female Gothic is always 'going back'; texts are haunted by their predecessors and, in turn, haunt their descendants.'¹⁷ The protagonist experiences paranoia and disbelief when she enters Rebecca's room and it is described as 'untouched', Mrs Danvers then clarifies: 'You would think she is still alive.'¹⁸ Mrs Danvers preserves Rebecca's wardrobe which, I argue, represents religious relics. Mrs de Winter is haunted forever by the events of Manderley and suffers because of her husband's crime, seen when she '[...] dreamt I was in Manderley again.' Du Maurier emphasises that the narrator is unable to progress mentally, like Laura, because she tells the story through a dream she has had more than once. Therefore, Mrs de Winter is slightly villainised but more so a victim of the patriarchy.

However, it is important to mention that I believe Mrs de Winter stays with Maxim because his social status benefits her, as on the night of the ball, she expresses: 'I had come down because I did not want the people at the ball to think I had quarrelled with Maxim.'¹⁹ Mrs de Winter, like Maxim, places

¹⁶ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 262.

¹⁷ Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories; Gender, Histories and the Gothic* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2013), 132.

¹⁸ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 277.

¹⁹ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 260.

importance upon reputation and could not be married to a man who was convicted of murder. She enjoyed the life of Manderley which was only made accessible through marrying Maxim; therefore, she felt as though she needed to defend him as she is dependent on him. Feminists argue Mrs de Winter felt compelled to stay with Maxim so she would rather suffer in an unfulfilling marriage than be labelled a criminal's wife. Mrs de Winter suffers either way due to the patriarchy and society. Furthermore, Du Maurier presents a shift in Mrs de Winter's character because she remains clear minded by not committing suicide and instead reiterates to Mrs Danvers: 'I am Mrs de Winter now.' The declarative sentence emphasises the authoritarian tone used by the protagonist for the first time. Keçdra-Kardela says: 'in the manner of female Gothic, she begins to speak on her own behalf – both as a character and as a narrator.'²⁰

Throughout the novel, Le Fanu presents Carmilla as an alluring yet monstrous vampire who embodies Victorian social fears about female sexuality and foreignness. The Gothic genre traditionally exposes societal anxieties shown as Carmilla continuously transgresses against the patriarchy and Le Fanu beautifies the evil within lesbian transgression. The vampire woman is an extension of femme fatale motif, seen in Carmilla's dominating advances when she admits to Laura: "I have been in love with no one, and never shall. [...] Unless it shall be with you."²¹ The Gothic monster is used to represent deviance and Carmilla's lesbian desire cannot be openly represented in a Victorian text, so it is displaced onto the image of a vampire instead. Laura recalls that: '[Carmilla] used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear, "Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if you dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours."²² The physical proximity between them depicts a variation of intimacy that was deemed unacceptable in Victorian society as it excludes men. However, homosexuality regarding women was not a concern because, Gökçek reiterates: 'Women were thought to be so innocent

²⁰ Anna Keçdra-Kardela, "'You have a lovely and unusual name.'" Mrs de Winter from Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca – a Gothic Heroine in Search of Identity," *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature* 43, no. 2 (2019): 84.

²¹ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 38.

²² Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 26.

that it was believed that by definition they are ignorant and incapable of any sexual impulses.’²³ To add to this, Le Fanu combines love and violence by Laura’s heart being ‘wounded’ both emotionally and physically. Le Fanu’s presentation of Carmilla is the classic Gothic creature that is associated with transgression, corruption, and forbidden desires. Her attraction to Laura is secretive and physically intimate aligning same-sex desire with Gothic themes of darkness and danger. Furthermore, the Gothic genre delves into the unknown threatening ‘Other,’ whether it is in reference to a monster or someone foreign. Carmilla’s ‘otherness’ is a threat to Laura as well as Austria which further villainises her because she could change Laura and others into vampires through sexuality. Mahi Taban highlights: ‘Carmilla’s Orientalisation is most evident in descriptions of her exaggerated sexuality.’²⁴ Le Fanu contrasts between Laura’s ‘little heart’ and Carmilla’s ‘wild heart’ portraying Laura as innocent and passive, following the angel in the house archetype, whereas Carmilla is wild categorising her as dangerous and untamed. The fear that stems from this is due to the threat in destroying pure women as well as pure bloodlines. Carmilla seeks connection with women more than once in the novel, so she can drink their blood emphasising the desire for blood is a metaphor for sex. Victorians believed in the relationship between blood and sexuality, and emphasised if a woman needed a blood transfusion, only her husband was viable. This is seen later in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, when Lucy needed blood and her fiancé was the first to donate because Dr. Van Helsing insisted and saw the act of blood transfusions as marital and joining.²⁵ Felipe Trindade argues: ‘Carmilla’s vampiric character is a metaphor for alterity.’²⁶ The ‘alterity’ is in reference to Carmilla’s vampiric form and homoerotic tendencies, so Le Fanu explores taboo topics but also condemns them by making lesbian desire monstrous, reflecting the patriarchal fears of female sexuality. Therefore, Carmilla must be punished to restore patriarchal norms highlighting that women who reject heterosexuality and patriarchal control must be killed. I personally believe Carmilla’s character is powerful for expressing her desire in a restrictive society by using her intelligence, therefore making Carmilla an advocate for same-sex and interracial relationships

²³ Gökçek, “Social Position,” 144.

²⁴ Mahi Taban, “Sexual Identity, Foreignness, and the Gothic Vampire; The Racialization of Homosexuality in Carmilla,” Clark University (2020): 4.

²⁵ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1897)

²⁶ Filipe Chernicharo Trindade, ““For the Blood is the Life”: vampirism and Alterity in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*,” *ABEI Journal* 26, no. 1 (2024): 62

The Gothic presentation of the threatening female outsider can be seen in other works, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Christabel* (1816)²⁷. Both Geraldine and Carmilla exercise their power over women and threaten male authority disrupting the patriarchy and morality. Coleridge keeps Geraldine's true nature hidden creating suspense whereas Carmilla's is exposed. Geraldine's 'stately neck, and arms were bare' make her appear innocent masking her threat but include elements of the Gothic by beautifying potential dangers.²⁸ Coleridge's poem is unfinished creating an ambiguous ending, so readers are unsure if Geraldine was villainised the same way Carmilla was. Le Fanu can be seen developing the ambiguous threat Coleridge hints at, turning Geraldine's seductive supernatural power into a full vampire within Carmilla. Critics like Mukherjee state: 'In conformity with the vampiric and other supernatural tropes and myths, Le Fanu gives both the reader and Laura a glimpse of Carmilla's true evil face.'²⁹ This evil face subverts the patriarchy further emphasising the threat Carmilla possesses.

There is a strong presentation of sexuality in *Rebecca* too but within Rebecca specifically. The novel presents female autonomy and desire as corruptive. Du Maurier presents Rebecca as a threat to patriarchal control, and she is villainised because she refuses to adhere to the expected role of a wife. This is because she is sexually confident and socially dominant. Maxim says Rebecca: 'would be up at dawn driving to London, streaking to that flat of hers by the river like an animal to its hole in the ditch.'³⁰ Du Maurier uses simile to make Maxim compare Rebecca to a wild animal signifying she is unable to be controlled. Du Maurier also highlights Rebecca's autonomy in overseeing Manderley while continuing with her affairs because she is aware of Maxim's fear of social scandals. Rebecca reminds Maxim: 'We could make you look so foolish that no one would believe you, Max, nobody at all.'³¹ Rebecca says this to warn Maxim that her social standing will override his claims of infidelity, challenging his role as a husband as she is taking charge. Rebecca continues to have affairs and Maxim says: '[Rebecca] began to grow careless.'³² This

²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel* in *Christabel and Other Poems*, ed. Hannaford Bennet (London: John Long's Carlton Classics, 1816)

²⁸ *Christabel*, I. 17.

²⁹ Aparajita Mukherjee, "Haunting Affinities: Seduction and Subversion in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" and Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla"," *Panchakotessays* 16, no. 1 (2025): 43.

³⁰ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 307.

³¹ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 312.

³² Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 308.

demonstrates Rebecca's confidence because she refuses to submit to Maxim and society in general. Rebecca fits the Gothic femme fatale archetype, like Carmilla, to show women who reject patriarchal norms are a threat. Maxim villainises Rebecca from a male perspective by comparing her to a monster. He says to Mrs de Winter: '[Rebecca] was a vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. [...] Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal.'³³ Maxim labels Rebecca through negative adjectives and dehumanises her, mirroring the language used to demonise non-conforming women. His hatred is rooted in her cruelty and his loss of control over her. Therefore, by being adulterous, autonomous and challenging, Maxim believed it was best to punish Rebecca by murdering her due to her transgressions. I agree with the opinion that: 'Maxim as a gothic villain seems to automatically imply that Rebecca is a feminist heroine, a woman whose worst crime [...] was simply that she resisted male definition, asserting her right to define herself and her sexual desire.'³⁴ Du Maurier makes Rebecca's presence continue to haunt Manderley further destabilising patriarchal power allowing the reader to question whether Rebecca is evil or punished by refusing to submit.

There is also an implied homoerotic relationship between Rebecca and Mrs Danvers. Although Du Maurier does not explicitly clarify the relationship between them, critics have suggested that Mrs Danvers possesses an implied queer devotion to Rebecca. This places Mrs Danvers' feelings outside heterosexual norms because it competes with Maxim's legal right to Rebecca and it resists the idea that women's emotional loyalty should belong to men. Beatrice clarifies to Mrs de Winter: '[...] she resents your being here at all, that's the trouble [...] She simply adored Rebecca.'³⁵ This leads to the depiction of Mrs Danvers to be cold, obsessive and destructive. Once Du Maurier died, her letters that highlighted her love for men and women were publicised. By being a writer in the 20th century, Du Maurier could not openly express queer identity in her writing and instead used ambiguity and secrecy within her text. The Gothic genre was a safe literary concealment that allowed her to write about the themes. Wallace supports this by saying: 'Du Maurier's potentially lesbian desires and her desire to write are imaged in Gothic terms.'³⁶ Du Maurier

³³ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 304.

³⁴ Pons, "Patriarchal Hauntings," 71.

³⁵ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 113.

³⁶ Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories*, 136.

reflects the literary pattern, like *Le Fanu*, where queer women are categorised as villains because their desires destabilise patriarchal family structures. Furthermore, Rebecca refuses motherhood and domestic obedience. In a patriarchal society, these refusals are labelled as monstrous. Kardela reinforces the idea that: ‘As a “chimera,” as a monster, Rebecca proved to be “both threatening and liberating.”’³⁷ Rebecca’s liberation was only achieved through death. Rebecca’s refusals to conform makes her morally evil, allowing Maxim to justify killing her however, Rebecca never speaks for herself. Everything the readers know about her comes from Maxim, Mrs Danvers and Mrs de Winter. Therefore, labelling Rebecca as morally evil stems from societal expectations. Rebecca’s autonomy and sexuality are filtered through unreliable or hostile voices making the patriarchy rewrite her independence as selfish. To add to this, patriarchal narratives deny a non-conforming woman a voice, and Rebecca’s death restores patriarchal order. Gothic fiction explores themes of madness, entrapment, and silencing women. Through death, Rebecca had been silenced because of her transgressions against the patriarchy. This emphasises the idea that women who do not submit to societal expectations are reframed as immoral to legitimise their punishment as their “crime” could lead to more corruption.

A final angle of transgression in sexuality is in the way Rebecca expresses her gender sexuality. Rebecca’s dominance in her marriage and initiating affairs are unconventional, portraying a masculine energy. Even in her appearance, Rebecca is masculine as Maxim says: ‘She began walking up and down the room, her hands in the pockets of her trousers. She looked like a boy in her sailing kit, a boy with a face like a Botticelli angel.’³⁸ Here, Rebecca refuses to conform to traditional femininity, emphasising her boyish persona and independence in her attire and action by putting her hands: ‘in the pockets of her trousers.’ Du Maurier also expressed regarding gender that: ‘[...] from a very young age she was what she called a “half-breed”, female on the outside “with a boy’s mind and a boy’s heart.”’³⁹ In addition, Du Maurier: ‘avoided

³⁷ Kędra-Kardela, ““You have a,” 84.

³⁸ Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 312.

³⁹ Olivia Laing, ‘Sex, jealousy and gender: Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* 80 years on’ *In The Guardian* (2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/23/olivia-laing-on-daphne-du-mauriers-rebecca-80-years-on>> [accessed 4 January 2026]

dresses, often dressed scruffily, and preferred to wear shorts, trousers, and ties as a child.⁴⁰ Naturally this manifested into her writing and wrote Rebecca to possess masculine and feminine traits because publicly Rebecca would embody the ideal wife. Maxim hated her dominant energy as it humiliated him therefore, he murdered her. Although Mrs de Winter is presented as child-like and naive, she also wants Maxim to treat her like a sort of boy in their companionship. Du Maurier emphasised that: ‘clothing is not simply decorative – it becomes a powerful symbol of identity, memory, and transformation.’⁴¹ Despite Rebecca and Mrs de Winter being portrayed differently, I argue that they are alike in some ways as neither of them commit fully to the conventional standards of a woman, resulting in both being victims of the patriarchy. In Alfred Hitchcock’s adaptation of *Rebecca* (1940), he portrays the two women as polar opposites.⁴² Mrs de Winter dresses feminine by wearing dresses, skirts or gowns which were popular in the 1940s completely contrasting Rebecca’s sense of style which consisted of fur coats and lingerie. Rebecca continues to haunt the narrative through her wardrobe to implement the Gothic themes of revealing secrets. However, Netflix’s adaptation of the novel portrays Mrs de Winter differently.⁴³ In the movie, she wears trousers as a key part of her wardrobe to depict her as a modern woman, not entirely different from Rebecca. This solidifies the similarity between Mrs de Winter and Rebecca.

One final way Carmilla transgresses against the patriarchy is by rejecting religion. She refuses to conform to patriarchal religious norms, highlighting the spiritual corruption and danger she encompasses. This is because within the novel, religion defines purity and societal expectations for women which Carmilla subverts as opposed to Laura. Laura reveals that she: ‘often wondered whether our pretty guest ever said her prayers. I certainly had never seen her upon her knees. In the morning, she never came down until long after our family prayers were over, and at night she never left the drawing room to attend our brief evening

⁴⁰ Belle R, ‘Daphne Du Maurier and Fashion’ *Blue Stocking Oxford* (2025) < [⁴¹ Belle R, ‘Daphne Du Maurier and Fashion’ *Blue Stocking Oxford* \(2025\) < \[⁴² *Rebecca*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock \\(Selznick International Pictures, 1940\\).\]\(https://blue-stocking.org.uk/2025/08/01/daphne-du-maurier-and-fashion/#:~:text=This%20alternative%20reality%20allowed%20Daphne,deep%20expression%20in%20her%20fiction.> \[accessed 5 January 2026\]</p></div><div data-bbox=\)](https://blue-stocking.org.uk/2025/08/01/daphne-du-maurier-and-fashion/#:~:text=This%20alternative%20reality%20allowed%20Daphne,deep%20expression%20in%20her%20fiction.> [accessed 5 January 2026]</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁴³ *Rebecca*, dir. by Ben Wheatley (Netflix, 2020)

prayers in the hall.’⁴⁴ The Gothic explores the themes of good vs evil, often intertwining it with religion by using Christian motifs to blur the lines. Readers question whether Carmilla is inherently evil by rejecting religion or if her vampiric nature is a religion and she is merely following the vampiric law. Carmilla often appears and commits her sins in the dark, and Gothic literature uses darkness to evoke fear. Laura also admits that: ‘Religion was a subject on which I had never heard her speak a word.’⁴⁵ In Victorian society, overt expression of religion was encouraged for women as it was evidence of moral respectability however, Carmilla remains silent suggesting resistance to religious authority. Here, I believe Le Fanu hints at Gothic Fanaticism by Carmilla’s outward rejection of religion because she ‘[stopped] her ears with her tiny fingers’ regarding religion.⁴⁶ Her rejection exposes the rigid, obsessive beliefs about gender are enforced through religion in the text. Critic Alyssa Johnson elaborates that: ‘Vampirism itself becomes a fanatical religion that consumes individuals, drains spiritual meaning, and destroys community.’⁴⁷ Gothic literature allows the exploration of religion and how women within the novel are affected by the patriarchy reinforcing Christianity. Le Fanu emphasises that women like Carmilla that reject Christianity have rejected salvation and must be punished for not conforming, vilifying Carmilla for her unconventionality.

In conclusion, the female Gothic genre shows a perspective of women rejecting patriarchal ideals being portrayed as monstrous and threatening in both in *Carmilla* and *Rebecca*. Laura and Mrs de Winter appear as passive victims, but their fragility was moulded by the patriarchal society that denied them female agency. In contrast, Carmilla and Rebecca are vilified because they express sexual and social independence, outside of male control. Their autonomy is presented as monstrous and corruptive, aligning female independence with danger and debauchery. The authors use the Gothic to critique the patriarchy’s control over women’s fates, because women that conformed were infantilised or entrapped whereas women who resisted were demonised and killed. Both texts expose the patriarchal power structures reveal that

⁴⁴ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 43.

⁴⁵ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 43.

⁴⁶ Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, 43.

⁴⁷ Alyssa Quinn Johnson, “Gothic Fanaticism: Christianity, Power, and Discourse in Nineteenth-Century British Gothic Fiction,” Texas Christian University ProQuest Dissertation & Theses (2023): 188.

villainisation is not ingrained in female transgression, but it is the reactions of women who feel trapped by restrictive standards, resulting in disrupting male authority.

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