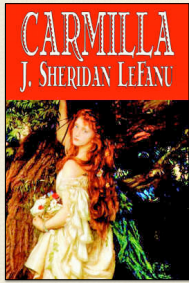


Carmilla



A novella by
Joseph Sheridan LeFanu

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Joseph Sheridan LeFanu

- ❖ Born 1814 in Dublin, Ireland. Died in 1873.
- ❖ He studied law but never worked as a lawyer; he worked as a journalist instead.
- ❖ *Carmilla* was published in 1872 in a book of short stories.
- ❖ Influenced Bram Stoker, who wrote *Dracula* 25 years later.
- ❖ After LeFanu's wife died, he became a recluse and wrote to look for "the equilibrium between the natural and the supernatural."

Carmilla

- ❖ One of finest vampire stories of 19th century.
- ❖ Ahead of its time: female protagonist/vampire.
- ❖ Erotic vampire tale.
- ❖ Text is carefully structured.
- ❖ Prologue discusses the story as a case investigated by occult investigator Dr. Hesselius.

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Laura's narrative

- ❖ Only child of an English father and Styrian mother, who died in childbirth.
- ❖ Live in castle once owned by Karnstein family (nobles).
- ❖ Has strange dream when she was six.
- ❖ Later meets the woman in her dream: Carmilla.
- ❖ Dreams again of catlike creature. Starts to become ill.

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Carmilla

- ❖ Described as a “strange and beautiful creature.” Her behavior is a mix of hate and love:
- ❖ “It was like the ardour of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering, and with gloating eyes she drew me in to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, and you and I are one for ever.’ ”

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Who is Carmilla?

- ❖ A newly restored portrait of Laura’s ancestor Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, looks just like Carmilla.
- ❖ Carmilla/Mircalla. Could they be the same? General Spielsdorf visits and describes his daughter’s death, caused by Mircalla, a beautiful mystery woman.
- ❖ Carmilla appears and general recognizes her and attacks her. Carmilla vanishes.
- ❖ They find her inside the countess’ tomb. Her body is perfectly preserved 150 years after funeral.
- ❖ Her body in the coffin is floating in blood.

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Death scene

- ❖ Body was raised and a sharp stake driven through her heart as she screamed.
- ❖ Head decapitated.
- ❖ Body and head burned to ashes.
- ❖ Ashes thrown into a river.

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Conclusion

- ❖ Laura writes her memories emotionally.
- ❖ Carmilla’s death frees Laura from nightmares.
- ❖ Discussion of vampires, their origins, powers, and signs.
- ❖ Laura still has memories of her ordeal, occasionally hearing “the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door.”

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***Carmilla* as gothic fiction**

- ❖ Distanced narration / isolated, distant setting
- ❖ Motherless girl meets damsel in distress; damsel, at first a sister, becomes a lover and murderess.
- ❖ Carmilla's past not discussed. She is a mystery.
- ❖ Author uses lesbianism ("you *shall* be mine") cleverly without mentioning it explicitly. Ambiguity about if this refers to lesbianism or vampirism.

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Is *Carmilla* more than this?

- ❖ Does she represent the scariest type of vampire?
- ❖ Does she embody the *vagina dentata* (Latin for "toothed vagina")?
- ❖ The myth of *vagina dentata*, a myth that has existed in many cultures for many years, suggests a woman can castrate a man with her "toothed vagina."

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What could be behind this myth?

- ❖ It deterred men from having sex with women outside of marriage.
- ❖ It encouraged couples to be married before having sex since a man can overcome a "toothed vagina" if he weds the woman.
- ❖ The myth portrays women as seductive, evil creatures who use sex to destroy men.

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What's the worse type of vampire?

- ❖ Question: What's worse than a male vampire?
- ❖ Answer: A female vampire. Her weapon, her open mouth of sharp teeth, links back to the concept of *vagina dentata*.
- ❖ Question: What's worse than a female vampire?
- ❖ Answer: A lesbian vampire who seduces innocent women to become just like her.

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