Drusilla, Kendra, & the Role of Agency In Vampire Literature

Between three of the major works of vampire related stories which involve an emphasis on the role of women, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Joss Whedon's 1997 television series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, women and vampires have had their patriarchal myths created, recreated, and then destroyed many times over. Lady vampires and other feminine protagonists of such stories have reinforced gender binaries, gave an outlet to man's biggest fears, but also subverted the patriarchy and annihilated conventional views about women. They serve as a cipher for the patriarchy's fears about the sexuality of women. They are aggressive, disobedient, and phallic.

Before the vampire novel of Stoker, and even Le Fanu's novella, heroines of the Gothic novel were already being portrayed in novels like *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764 by Horace Walpole, with what Katie Saulnier refers to as "infallible purity." (Par. 1) In *Why Drusilla Is More Interesting Than Buffy*, Laura Diehl documents many of the misogynistic attacks mainstream Victorian medicine give to women. Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and others portray women as bloody, whether in childbirth, sex, or menstruation, monsters (Par. 8). This anemia leads to women being compared to animals, whose instinctive drives for sex, blood, and reproduction control their every being. These descriptions are quite literally like that of a vampire. The desires of women can, and will, infect men and even other women.

Feminine agency, whether woman or vampire, offers the chance to be more than pawns in the kinship exchanges and traditions of men. This essay will focus on the ways in which a few of the emerging characters of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer's* second series both defy and embrace, sometimes at the same time, previous standards of feminine agency established in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, with the coinciding rewards and punishments. As Diehl points out, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* is at its brightest when incorporating literary, medical, and scientific aspects of Gothic sexuality into the show. However, as Diehl also notes, the more "conservative sexual morality" of characters like Buffy Summers and Cordelia Chase

make them less appealing for further examination (Par. 1). Kendra, the vampire slayer, and, her murderer, Drusilla, the famed, and very unruly, vampire, will be the characters that are closely examined in this paper. Of particular importance is the connection between Whedon's characters and the primary female protagonists of Stoker's novel.

In *Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel*, Lynn Pykett argues that "female Gothic" writing allowed women during the Victorian period to "recontain their fantasies of escape from the physical and psychological confinements of...domestic and conventionally defined femininity" (108). The same could be said of women in vampire fiction like *Dracula*, *Carmilla*, and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. After the radical nature of the women in *Carmilla* is subverted back towards a patriarchal norm in *Dracula*, Drusilla, the lady vampire on Joss Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, stands both in defiance and embracement of many of the tropes of the lady vampire which male writers like Le Fanu and Stoker had written before. Drusilla is not only a vampire, but also has the capabilities of a witch and a siren. She can read minds and is not susceptible to hypnosis but rather can, rather aggressively, hypnotize others.

Kendra is a dutiful, obedient, Slayer called to duty after the brief death of Buffy Summers at the end of the show's first series. She never questions her male Watcher or the patriarchal Watcher's Council. Her role as a Slayer is to devote herself to these men, never deviating from their expectations or, even briefly, from the gaze of their approval. This leads to her being highly susceptible to Drusilla's hypnosis.

Stoker's novel is a troubling text where the desires of women are punished violently. Lucy's sexual desires are "cured" by vampirism and a stake through the heart. Mina Harker's interest in the "New Women" of the era leads to her being punished through Dracula himself. Despite *Carmilla* being about the supernatural, Le Fanu, "uses the vampire motif primarily to focus on the condition of women's lives during the time that he wrote." (Senf 25) Le Fanu comments on the role of women during Victorian times and attitudes towards women. In Le Fanu's novella, sickness and hysteria in one woman leads to more of it in

other women. In some ways, as many others like Sherryl Vint and Amanda Turner have argued, Whedon's portrayal of Summers as the protagonist of the show is not an enlightened, feminist, statement as another segment of writers about the show have argued.

Which leads to Drusilla. Diehl argues that unruly nature of Drusilla is an "attractive alternative" to the more stable, hetronormative characters like Buffy Summers (Par. 1). As compared to Stoker, or even Le Fanu, Drusilla is a construction of literary and historical intertextuality. She is not just a pawn or metaphor for male anxiety about feminine sexual desire. Much as Carmilla and Laura are portrayed as "sickly" in Le Fanu's novella, Drusilla's rather telling portrayal when she is first introduced is that of a sick, virginal, Victorian girl.

Originally published in the short story collection *In A Glass Darkly* in 1872, Le Fanu's story *Carmilla* portrays Laura, who also narrates, a young lady who lives with her widowed father in a castle somewhere in Eastern Europe. The arrival of another young woman named Carmilla leads to a close friendship between them. The newcomer behaves oddly, however; she sleeps for most the day and rarely, if ever, eats. As the story goes on, Laura emulates her friend's behavior, "alarmingly los(ing) her own health and energy." (Heller 78) Carmilla feeds, literally, off of her beautiful friend, making Laura more like her. This special relationship, and emulative behavior that follows, as Heller argues, can be read as a metaphor for the hysterical woman and nineteenth-century concerns about feminine sexuality and desire. Lady vampires are rare in these early periods, but even rarer is a woman like Laura being the victim. Le Fanu portraying a female protagonist and a female vampire stands in defiance of conventions which Stoker would reaffirm later in his novel.

Unlike Laura, who, like Mina Murray and Kendra, is supposed to conform to patriarchal standards of conformity and obedience, Carmilla, because of her status as a vampire, is "othered," allowing for rebellion and lesbian desires (Pyktett 108). The novella has been read, by Michael Davis in *Gothic's*

Enigmatic Signifier: The Case of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' as a story about the conflicts which "repressed lesbian desire" invoke through conscious and unconscious desires (224). This argument is furthered by queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, who takes Gayle Rubin's famous argument about the traffic in women and examines the role of what she refers to as "compulsory heterosexuality" in both male and female friendship and marriages (Sedgwick 134). Male relationships, according to Sedgwick, are differentiated between outright homosexual relationships and what she refers to as "homosocial desire." (1) Women are included in these relationships to make these relations safer than a straight forward male to male relationship. The family structures discussed by Levi-Strauss and Rubin make "homophobia..a necessary consequence of...patriarchal institutions" (3). In these relationships, women are objects used to affirm patriarchal, heterosexual relationships to link men together.

After Carmilla's death, the narrative ends with Laura's father taking her though Italy on holiday. This year long trip serves to "reinstate Laura in the male chain of exchange," and rid her of any remaining homosexual longings (Signoratti 7). However, ten years hence, Laura writes about the "playful, languid, beautiful girl" she used to know and often finds herself "fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door" (112). The Italian trip, according to Signorratti, fails because "Laura has tasted the sweet fruit of self-determination." At the end of the novella Laura continues to have agency. Despite mixed feelings about her vampiric friend throughout the narrative, her "sense of attraction immensely prevailed." (29) A woman like Laura, who loses so much blood, is supposed to be a metaphor for the Victorian ideal of femininity: weak, docile, and sickly. Still, Laura longs for Carmilla 10 years hence, retaining her own desires in the face of patriarchal pressure.

While the feminine bonds between Laura and Carmilla connect them and enable Laura to gain agency over her life, the bonds of the women of *Dracula* serve as a mean for patriarchy to both punish women and unite men. Both Mina and Lucy are punished repeatedly throughout the novel for their actions,

which end in the death of Lucy. Mina's enthrallment to Dracula is the bind that ties together the male party who vanquishes the Count.

As Signorotti argues, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a culmination of other 19th century novels which have been overshadowed, is a direct response to Carmilla (1). The relationship of Laura and Carmilla defies patriarchal exchange which promotes male bonding. Stoker's female characters are, Levi-Strauss puts it, "supreme gifts" whose exchange finally binds the men of Dracula together (65). In the Whedonverse, Summers is clearly the “supreme gift” that the male vampires Spike and Angel both fight and bond over. This relationship is particularly explored, and lampooned in the fifth series episode of Angel's spin-off “The Girl In Question.”

According to Heller, the bond between Carmilla and Laura also leads the men in the novella to unify together (78). In patriarchal relationships like these, women exist as a means of unifying the male protagonists and detour their desires back towards hetronormative relationships. There is a strong juxtaposition between how Stoker writes the main female protagonists, Mina and Lucy, in *Dracula*. Lucy is characterized, even before becoming a vampire, as very aggressive in regards to her sexuality. As Lucy loses her purity, her letters to Mina become a male fantasy of sexual anarchy. This rather male aggression would have been seen as unladylike during the Victorian period. Lucy wonders aloud, in a letter to Mina, why can't “a girl marry three men, or as many as want her?” (58). This makes Lucy a grave threat to traditional gender roles. Stoker's violent punishment for Lucy is quite telling, given the same letter, where she also asks Mina “why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them?” (58) Unlike Laura, Lucy's unpure, unladylike, behavior is eventually punished in the most violent way possible.

Lucy's behaviors often mirror those of Carmilla. In both stories, the propensity towards vampirism begins during childhood. Carmilla visits Laura and bites her on the chest. As a child, Lucy sleepwalks, which continues into the novel's narrative. Lucy also seems to have lesbian desires toward Mina, who, in

another letter, she writes “l wish I were with you, dear, sitting by the fire undressing, as we used to sit; and I would try to tell you what I feel.” (54) As Diehl argues about male authors of female vampires, Mina and Lucy become both “man's sexual nightmare and sexual obsession.” (Par. 4).

Going against the tide of other Gothic vampire novels of the time period, like *Carmilla*, both Lucy and Mina are somewhat two dimensional in their characterization. Jonathan comments in his journal that Mina cannot learn the truth about what he has experienced because it would “frighten her to death.” (42) Later, after having read his “awful” journals, she seems to regret having even looked at them (174). According to Jonathan's journal, Helsing, praising “Madam Mina,” describes her as “one of God's women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and other women that there is a heaven where we can enter.” The women of the novel, virtuous and pure, allow the men to unite around them to defend idealized Victorian gender roles from an Evesque fall. Mina, who apparently “has man's brains” and “a woman's heart,” is refused to be part of the company setting out to destroy Dracula, “it is no part for a woman,” until she falls under Dracula's influence (223). At this point, Helsing is able to hypnotize and use her as a means of tracking the Count. Only when her purity comes into question do the men accept her as a member of their company.

Ms Harker is almost Willow Rosenbergesque in her embracing of both new technology and the supernatural. Throughout the series, Willow works hard to learn more skills to assist her Slayer friend. So that she can be more “useful” to her fiancé, Jonathan Harker, Mina learns how to use a typewriter and decipher shorthand (53). Jonathan writes in shorthand for Mina to translate when she receives his notes and letters. Her journal is a document of her times with Lucy before their marriages and a chronicle of the concerns she has about her fiancé's travels.

Their journals and letters, created with modern technology, become a living document of the battle between the old and new worlds. Mina and Lucy’s letters and journals show them to be New Women of a

new world emerging during the Industrial Revolution. Helsing, the patriarchal authority figure, is able to, through his letters, have a foot in both old world superstition and new world technology like blood transfusions. Later, both female protagonists are punished by Count Dracula for their defiance of Victorian purity.

The fall from grace of both Lucy and Mina becomes a titular fantasy for men, obsessed since Eve with the fall of women and the cost to their sexual capital it will entail. Both women play the Eve role in the novel. Men, while turned off and disgusted by the outpouring of sexuality by Lucy, are curious and drawn to the hyper-sexualized female. This sexualized female goes against the wishes of a patriarchal society. The titillation men feel towards them requires a strong punishment. Responding to Mina's next letter, Lucy then admits to a desire for polygamous relationships with men. After receiving three wedding proposals from three different men, she documents them for Mina. Interestingly, she makes sure to argue to Mina that she must tell Jonathan about these proposals. Women “aren't quite as fair as they should be,” but yet she tells her friend to document the men chasing her to Mina's fiancé (55)?

Lucy is portrayed in her letters as a fallen angel who is becoming more and more promiscuous. For this betrayal of Victorian standards, she is punished with vampirism and must be cured by Helsing, the male authority figure with old world knowledge. Lucy, as a vampire, literally becomes a man eater. Sexual desire, vampirism, in a female is a disease that needs to be detected and cured with a stake through the heart. Later, in Mina's journal, Mrs. Harker also shows signs of impurity. This time it is association with the ideals of “New Women.” She believes that these New Women will soon begin arguing for men and women to be able to see each other in their beds before the engagement period. She sounds frankly excited by the idea of New Women doing the proposing themselves. Mina's independent streak is punished through infection by Dracula later in the novel.

Throughout *Dracula*, Stoker has denied agency to Mina and Lucy. Mina, it could be argued, is a

lot like Laura in her embracement of the New Women mentality, but, unlike Laura, her agency is denied in the end. Her interest in the New Women leads her to punishment from Dracula. After the men bond around her, she conforms to patriarchal expectations and settles into domestic life. Her friend Lucy's sexual desires are punished with vampirism and a stake through the heart. Despite their independence, the female protagonists of Dracula are still pawns of male kinship rituals which unite men in homosocial bonds.

As a descendant of the regressive nature of *Dracula*, Joss Whedon's 1997 television series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, despite the compelling and applaudable feminist leanings of the series, I agree with Diehl that the character of Buffy Summers isn't very compelling for closer examination. Paternal figures like Rupert Giles and Angel, especially in the earlier series', often make decisions for her with the so-called best interest of the Slayer in mind. These decisions often have more consequences for the confused and, until much later, often sexually conservative Ms. Summers.

Two characters really stand out for further examination. In regards to their relationship to Stoker's novel, both Kendra, the Slayer who appears in series two after the brief death of Buffy Summers at the end of series one, and Drusilla, the vampire who viciously murders her in the finale of series two, share similarities with the female protagonists of *Dracula*. Drusilla's, as Diehl notices, an anagram of Dracula and Carmilla, agency is twofold. When she first appears, Drusilla is always dressed in virginal white. On the surface, she is Victorian beauty perfected: wait, childlike, playing with the doll Miss Edith, and sickly. Like Lucy, she is innocent, virginal, and the ideal Victorian girl. Underneath, she is insane, a mesmerist, and hyper-sexualized. The Gothic values and appearance are a fascinating intertextual mix of literature, history, and medicine which dance together, disrupt, and forge a rather unruly female vampire more in line with Carmilla than Lucy, or any of the women of Dracula in general.

Unlike Carmilla, Drusilla is not suppressed or “othered” in any significant fashion. Senf argues that Carmilla proves how unconforming to the “angels in the attic” of Victorian Literature or the women of

sensation novels like *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. Women can be both exploiters and exploited. The same can be said of Drusilla, who both exploits others and is exploited, particularly by the males in her life.

During series two, Drusilla defies the standards set for Victorian femininity, especially in regards to reproduction. In "School Hard," when she is introduced, Drusilla remarks that "everything I put in the ground withers and dies" ("School Hard"). Later, in a scene Diehl deconstructs in detail, in the episode "I Only Have Eyes For You," "mock(s) repressive discourses that bind women's sexuality to reproduction" by remarking to Spike and Angelus that we can "find you a nice toddler" ("I Only Have Eyes For You").

In *Carmilla*, Heller argues, Le Fanu is using the misogynistic medical convention of the time that where there is one hysterical, "infected," woman, there will be more (77). While women "infect" each other in Le Fanu's story, Drusilla sires others, not only women, but males as well including her long time on and off love interest Spike. Drusilla continues to stand on her own when she declares to Angel that he is unable to hurt her anymore in "Lie To Me." ("Lie To Me") The resouling of her sire Angelus to the good vampire Angel allows her to remove the hold over her he had in the past. She reigns above her sire while torturing him in the first part of "What's My Line." She tells him he has "been a very bad daddy" and douses him with holy water. ("What's My Line")

Continuing to inflict pain on her sire, Drusilla talks about her mother and then asks Angel if he remembers her, to which she replies "of course you remember...you came and ripped (her) throat out." ("What's My Line"). Drusilla's agency has been gained when her vampiric father figure is gone. She is, as Diehl argues, "no longer a victim but a literal hell raiser." (Par. 18) Her agency is not lost when she leaves Sunnydale with Spike, as she ends up leaving him as well; eventually, she would return to resire Darla and attack Angel and Wolfram & Hart. Drusilla destroys the kinship link to her father/sire, which invalidates the connection she has with Spike as well. The bonds of male kinship which kept them together, unlike

Dracula's ending, are destroyed by Drusilla's actions.

Kendra, the Vampire Slayer, is viciously murdered by Drusilla at the end of series two. She is a dutiful, obedient, Slayer who follows the instructions the patriarchal Watcher's Council gives her. She is their pawn, often questioning Buffy Summers' more rebellious actions, proclaiming, “no wonder you died,” in part one “What's My Line?”when Buffy announces that she “(doesn't) take orders.” (“What's My Line”) Richardson notes as an example the second part of “What's My Line,” where Kendra goes out of her way to seek Rupert Giles' approval through referencing obscure texts that Buffy has never even heard of (“What's My Line”). Richardson continues, while discussing Sartre's concept of “Bad Faith,” reportedly a favorite of Whedon's, to argue that Kendra is so easily hypnotized by Drusilla in “Becoming Part One” because she has always replied “on the Look of her Watcher.” (Par. 10) Kendra's agency is easily wrestled away from her by the Vampire, who proceeds to slit her throat.

Kendra lacks the agency to disobey instruction, male or otherwise. Drusilla is able to easily control and murder her because, according to Jana Reiss, “she has always obeyed without question and has not strengthened her mind and spirit by discovering her own unique path.” (Qtd. In Richardson Par. 3) Drusilla is able to take ownership of Kendra's freedom away from the Watcher's Council and use it to destroy the girl. Ownership of Kendra's agency is transferred in an instance from the patriarchal Watcher's Council to the female, assertive, vampire Drusilla. This trade-off renders her incapable of stopping her own murder.

Nevertheless, possession does not have to lead to a lack of agency. In the unruly Carmilla, the female vampire's infection and “sexual possession” of Laura allows her to escape being married off to General Spielsdorf (Repossessing The Body). She is too ill to be married by then. With this trafficking of a woman, male kinship and bond could have been reestablished. However, Laura has already taken part in an exchange with Carmilla, thus rendering her unable to take part in the male exchange of women. In fact, she finds Carmilla's possession of her to be “gentle...not unwelcome” and and that it gives her “a sense of

exhaustion.” (59) Laura has declared her own agency and chosen Carmilla over any man.

Drusilla and Lucy share a man's sexual appetite and desire for agency over their lives. These masculine urges both eventually lead them to their downfalls. Lucy is staked through the heart and Drusilla is lit on fire by the now “heroic,” often patronizing and Van Helsingesque, Angel. Kendra and Mina's inability to lower their eyes from the gaze of men allows them to become easily conditioned and kept docile, feminine, and obedient.

Finally, what does it mean for *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* that the counterparts to characters from *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, two of the most popular and influential works of vampire fiction, aren't even in the primary cast of the show and, outside of season two, rarely appear? The deepness of the Whedonverse allows for detailed feminist deconstruction to be done outside of the primary, most conservatively sexual, cast members. By burying a more radical character like Drusilla, or a character who comments on previous works like Kendra, outside the primary text, a more nuanced exploration of these issues can occur.

The nuance of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* or Stoker's *Dracula* is given deeper examination through the layers and layers of Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. A vampire like Drusilla, rooted in feminist approaches to agency, is an even more important character. She is so unruly that her patriarchal sire has to light her on fire. Kendra shows what can happen to a woman who unconditionally follows the orders or patriarchal society without ever tilting her gaze. These intertextual conversations can happen outside of the primary character set, allowing for other issues, such as Whedon's deconstruction of the prototypical blond woman in horror films though Buffy Summers, or the evolution and coming out of a queer person through Willow Rosenberg. By giving nods to the past, while evaluating modern issues, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* is able to raise and critique these issues and more.

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