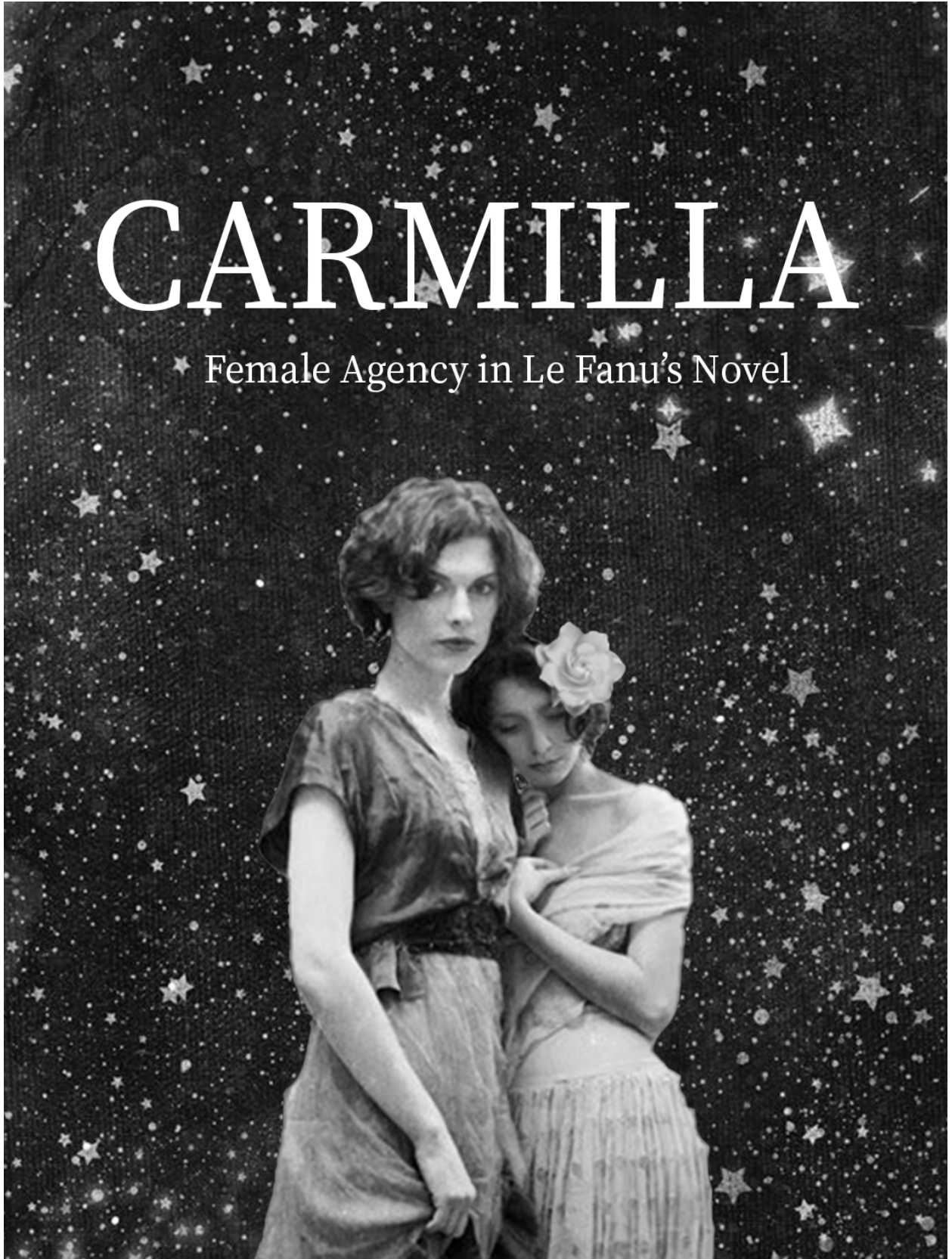
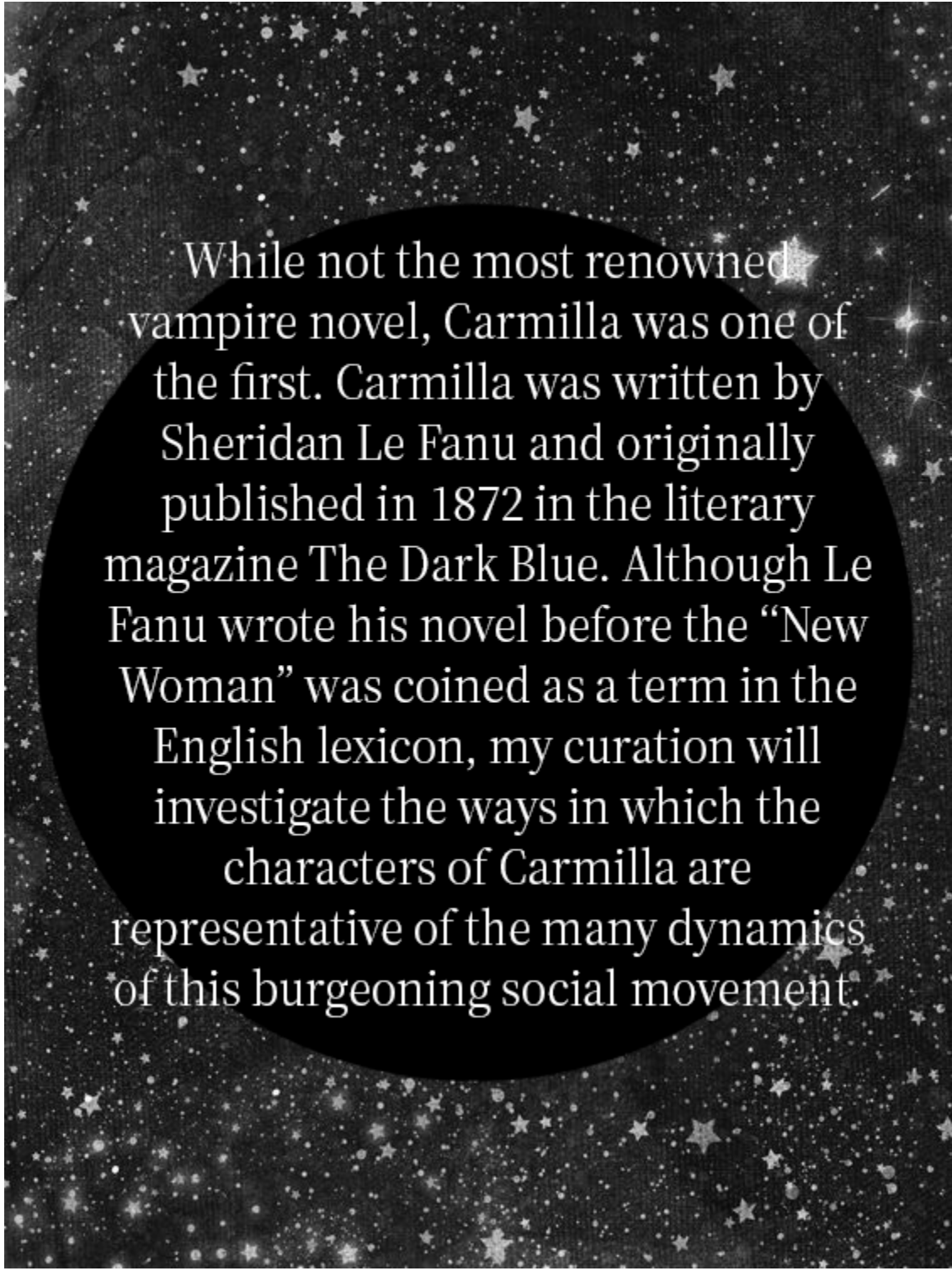


CARMILLA

Female Agency in Le Fanu's Novel





While not the most renowned vampire novel, *Carmilla* was one of the first. *Carmilla* was written by Sheridan Le Fanu and originally published in 1872 in the literary magazine *The Dark Blue*. Although Le Fanu wrote his novel before the “New Woman” was coined as a term in the English lexicon, my curation will investigate the ways in which the characters of *Carmilla* are representative of the many dynamics of this burgeoning social movement.

CARMILLA: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The reader is first introduced to Carmilla, the female vampire, at the beginning of the novel. Laura, the main non-vampiric character, recounts her experience as a young child meeting Carmilla for the first time in a dreamlike state: "I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, her hands under the coverlet" (12). Carmilla is representative of the "New Woman" as she exhibits many traits of female agency that would become more mainstream in the following decades. For instance, Carmilla has strong sexual ambition. Carmilla explicitly expresses her infatuation with Laura stating, "I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so" (47). Carmilla also displays her strong sexual ambition as she has multiple relationships with different women such as Bertha Rheinfedt. Additionally, in Carmilla's previous life as a human, readers also discover her romantic relationship with Baron Vordenburg's ancestor. Women during the Victorian period were thought to have no sexual ambition whatsoever. Women's sexual gratification was supposed to come from pleasing their husband and capitulating to his needs. In fact, women were expected to stay chaste until marriage, although it was not uncommon for men to use prostitutes before and during marriage. Carmilla not only does not submit to these patriarchal expectations, but circumvents them altogether by expressing only sexual attraction to her female counterparts.

CARMILLA: CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

Similarly, women during the Victorian period were thought to be morally superior to men. The ideal Victorian woman was expected to be more sympathetic and attend to the suffering of others. Throughout the novel, Carmilla causes death and damage to those in which she comes in contact with. Carmilla has no sympathy for the women she murders or their families. For instance, as Carmilla and Laura sit under the shade of a tree one afternoon, a funeral procession of a young woman passes by. Laura rises and begins to sing a hymn out of respect, but Carmilla says, "You pierce my ears. Besides, how can you tell that your religion and mine are the same; your forms wound me, and I hate funerals. What a fuss! Why you must die, everyone must die; and all are happier when they do" (37). Women were expected to be more morally superior to men because they were the ones who traditionally ran a household. Women were in charge of raising a new generation to submit to Victorian values and be successful contributors to society.

Additionally, Carmilla undermines Victorian patriarchal values by emasculating men. As women were thought to be weak, men were expected to be strong. Men in Victorian society were heads of the house and protectors to all those who inhabited it, especially the women. Successful men in Victorian society were not only seen as providing financially for the household, but protecting those who tried to invade it. It is ironic then that the dangerous Carmilla is invited into Laura's house by Laura's father. One of the best examples of Carmilla undermining male authority is when she kills her victim Bertha. While Bertha sleeps, her protector, General Spielsdorf, watches outside her room with his sword in hand, ready to kill the vampire that is plaguing her. However, the General fails to kill Carmilla as she attacks: "Speculating I know not what, I struck at her instantly with my sword; but I saw her standing near the door unscathed" (97).



An Illustration of Carmilla and Laura watching a funeral procession, created by Michael Fitzgerald for the 1872 publication.



An 1872 Illustration by David Henry
Friston of General Spielsdorf waiting to
attack Carmilla.

CARMILLA: CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

Ultimately, Carmilla gets away and is able to infect another household. Carmilla's escape is so significant because much of Victorian society's fear around the "New Woman" was her ability to take men's roles. Carmilla displays immense strength, because ultimately she has the power to kill all those who come into contact with her.

CARMILLA'S DEMISE: LE FANU'S CONDEMNATION OF THE "NEW WOMAN"

Many aspects of Carmilla are very subversive; however, ultimately, Carmilla meets her demise at the end of the novel as she is killed by General Spielsdorf and the other men who are in the chapel: "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" (103). Carmilla's death brings a more conservative undertone to the novel. It is very symbolic that Carmilla is killed by the very men she manipulated and while Carmilla was able to subvert male authority temporarily, she was not able to ultimately escape it. If Le Fanu truly wanted to support the idea of female agency, he might have had Carmilla escape and Laura die. Also, while Carmilla does have female agency and sexual ambition, these traits are taken to an extreme. Ultimately, Carmilla is depicted as a sexual predator. Also, Carmilla is, as a literal monster, a vampire and an outcast of society. Perhaps, though, Le Fanu was subversive within the parameters that Victorian society would allow. Le Fanu's novel might not have been published if he did not subscribe to a more conservative ending. Le Fanu's career and legacy might have been tarnished if he wrote an ending where Carmilla was victorious.

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https://www.pinterest.com/pln/801359327461393423/?nic_v3=1a5lwUXfi (starry night sky)

<http://leopoldest.blogspot.com/2016/02/> (two women together, front cover)

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/4574037108366388/?nic_v3=1a5lwUXfi (flower in girl's hair)