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“ATROCIOUS LUSTS”: THE VAMPIRE AND TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITY IN POLIDORI, LE FANU, AND RICE

Abstract

Gothic literature has always tackled various anxieties present in contemporary culture. One such theme the Gothic deals with is the anxiety related to changing social norms regarding sexuality, gender roles, and the family. This paper aims to summarise how the Gothic deals with transgressive sexuality and changing gender roles. The works discussed are selected based on their historical and cultural importance. “The Vampyre” is the first prominent English vampire story, and it also explores the titular vampire’s sexual voraciousness. “Carmilla” is the first prominent Gothic story which thematises lesbianism, while *Interview with the Vampire* is the first to embrace homosexuality. They are analysed and compared to uncover how the representation of transgressive sexuality in the genre has changed over time.

Key words: the Gothic, transgression, sexuality, vampirism, *Interview with the Vampire*, “Carmilla”, “The Vampyre”

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1. Introduction

The Gothic is a genre that has enjoyed popularity for a few centuries due to its ability to tap into the socially conditioned fears and anxieties of its audience and displace them onto fantastical, supernatural narratives where those fears and anxieties might find a resolution and thus provide the readers with a confirmation of their worldview. The vampire is one of, if not the most common figures onto which fears and anxieties of a given era have been projected. Primarily, the vampire exists as a means of dealing with mortality and accepting death. These revenants are typically troubled creatures in a constant state of agony, even if they seem to enjoy life's pleasures like Rice's infamous Lestat. Thus, they provide a very negative image of immortality, making death at least somewhat palatable. This was particularly important in the context of the nineteenth century, when faith and the belief in an afterlife were shaken by scientific progress, creating a crisis of faith and a desperate need to confirm religious beliefs or at least find solace. Furthermore, the vampire's return from the dead may signify that there indeed is an afterlife one can return from, confirming the traditional Christian view. Apart from death, the vampire can become a useful metaphor for any pervading anxiety. This might be a xenophobic fear of foreigners and foreign influences like in *Dracula* (1897), a fear of the invasion on the private sphere, which can also be noticed in the same novel, as well as "Carmilla" (1872), anxieties about corrupting influence that comes from within the community, like in newer vampire media such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), or other anxieties such as the spread of disease, alcohol and drug addiction, moral decay, and particularly, non-normative sexuality.

Therefore, the vampire has always been a transgressive figure, most often portrayed as the antithesis of conventional norms of behaviour. They rise at dusk, consume blood for nourishment instead of eating food, have a disregard for human life, and are most often imbued with a voracious sexual appetite that mirrors the one they have for blood. However, these transgressive traits are typically not utilised as a means to subvert the dominant, bourgeois, order or to provide a critical perspective, like in contemporary transgressive literature. More often than not, the Gothic utilises transgressive images precisely to assert the dominance of the current dominant order. In vampire literature, the vampire is an existential threat not just to the lives of the characters, but also to their entire way of life,

and must be eliminated. The reader is invited to sympathise and identify with the victims and vampire hunters, who are on a quest to eliminate the threat and restore the order subverted by the vampiric menace. Of course, there are nuances to this model, as the paper will discuss in detail, but vampire fiction that invites one to identify with the vampire is relatively rare and appears much later in literary history.

The threat of transgressive sexuality and changing gender norms is something that permeates almost all representations of vampires in Gothic literature, from the earliest incarnations such as John William Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819) to contemporary media such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) and its subsequent film adaptations. As Punter and Byron say, "Throughout the nineteenth century, the vampire functions to police the boundaries between 'normal' and 'deviant' sexuality, with the narrative voice firmly positioned on the side of the 'normal'" (Punter & Byron: 1995, 269–270). The "deviant" sexuality represented in these novels can be either heterosexual but falling outside the norm, such as premarital, extra-marital, or promiscuous sex, or it can be homosexual. Homosexual desire is often at least implicitly present in Gothic literature, especially if it deals with vampirism. As Sedgwick states, "the Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality, at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its visibility and distinctness, were markers of division and tension between classes as much as between genders" (Sedgwick: 1985, 91). Homosexual desire is sometimes implicit as part of a vampire's general voraciousness, such as in *Dracula*, but is sometimes even openly thematised as a source of fear and anxiety, which can be seen in "Carmilla". However, this desire is typically seen as dangerous, and deviant, and it expresses a deeply-rooted homophobia that needs to be expelled by a male heterosexual hero. It wasn't until the publication of Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) that readers got to encounter sympathetically portrayed vampires who express transgressive, homosexual desire. However, even after the publication of this and the subsequent novels in the *Vampire Chronicles* series, there was little place in mainstream Gothic fiction for non-normative sexuality, and the major media in the genre seems to have returned to an insistence on heterosexual, patriarchal, modes of sexuality, such as in the aforementioned *Twilight* series or *The Vampire Diaries* (1991).

Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the relationship which the Gothic genre has with transgressive sexuality. Transgressive sexuality is

understood here as any sexual behaviour which falls outside of the scope of heteronormative and patriarchal modes, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, non-monogamy, or extra-marital sex. Apart from this topic, some attention is given to the representation of gender norms in the selected texts, as the discussion of sexuality is almost inseparable from the discussion of gender. In addition to that, familial and parent/child relationships are also discussed where appropriate and related to the main topic. The texts selected for discussion here are “The Vampyre”, “Carmilla”, and *Interview with the Vampire*. “The Vampyre” is relevant because it is the first seminal piece of vampire fiction in Anglophone literature and also possesses a great emphasis on the titular vampire’s sexual behaviour. “Carmilla” is an even more relevant piece of literature, as it is one of the most important pieces of Gothic fiction that focus on lesbian desire, and it also leaves some room for identification with the lesbianism presented. *Interview with the Vampire* is relevant not only because of its immeasurable influence on the presentation of the vampire in literature and popular culture, but also because it is the first seminal Gothic work that invites the reader to sympathise with the vampire along with his homosexual desire. Essentially, the paper analyses how these texts deal with transgressions against what Gayle Rubin calls, the sex/gender system, which she defines as “a set of arrangements by which the raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be” (Rubin: 1975, 165).

In addition to the concept of the sex/gender system outlined in Rubin’s seminal essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975), the paper also draws on the idea of homosocial relationships discussed in Eva Sedgwick Kosofsky’s book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). The paper also borrows some crucial insights from David Punter and Glennys Byron, in particular, Punter’s book *Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition* (2013), and their co-authored study *The Gothic* (2004).

2. Moral decay in “The Vampyre”

John William Polidori’s (1795–1821) short story “The Vampyre” might be one of the most influential pieces of vampire fiction, not just in English literature, but in general, especially pertaining to the pop cultural

understanding of the vampire. While it was not the first story in European literature to deal with the subject of vampirism, it cemented the image of the vampire as a sleek monster of aristocratic origins who uses his charm to ensnare his victims, toying with them before destroying them both physically and mentally. Polidori's vampire is essentially a parody of Lord Byron, for whom Polidori had briefly worked before writing the story, and it introduced a few changes to the vampire, which were subsequently copied by other authors to a greater or lesser extent. His vampire is "not only a conscious vampire, but a perfectly willing one" (Scherf & Macdonald: 2008, 13), as opposed to a reanimated corpse driven by a compulsion. He is also an aristocrat, enjoying typical aristocratic vices such as gambling, and also travels a lot, as opposed to haunting a specific location (*Ibid*: 13–14). Most importantly for this discussion, Lord Strongmore¹ is a vampire with a strong sexual appetite who employs his seductive capabilities and charisma to infiltrate high-class society and corrupt it from within. This is a significant change compared to the vampires of folklore, especially the ones from South Slavic countries, from where the vampire myth spread to Western Europe. The folkloric vampire can also be strongly sexual, but "his sexuality is obsessive—indeed, in Yugoslavia, when he is not sucking blood, he is apt to wear out his widow with his attentions, so that she too pines away, much like his other victims" (Barber 1988: 9). The sexuality of a folklore vampire lacks the predetermination and conscious predatory aspect possessed by Lord Strongmore and most subsequent vampires.

Lord Strongmore's transgressive sexuality is firmly tied to his general love of vice and flaunting social conventions. While he is a transgressive character, his transgressive characteristics are utilised to harness the nineteenth-century fear of moral decay and societal degradation. Unlike some later vampires, such as Dracula, who are the ethnic other and thus represent a threat of a foreign invasion, Lord Strongmore is not a foreigner, but a representative of the aristocracy, which was increasingly being seen as "ethereal, decorative, and otiose in relation to the vigorous and productive values of the middle class" (Sedgwick 1985: 93). Thus, he is a fitting threat for the bourgeois class and its conservative morals. At the very onset of the narrative, he is shown as a threat to the virtue of both wives and daughters, all the more insidious for not conducting his affairs openly. The narrator says that "such was the caution with which he spoke to the virtuous wife and innocent daughter, that few knew he ever addressed himself to females" (Polidori 2008: 40), which poses a double

threat. On the one hand, he takes pleasure in taking advantage of women and engaging in illicit sexual affairs, but on the other hand, the fact that few knew that he engaged with women may also point towards an implicit fear of homosexuality. However, he is not only dangerous because he seeks out victims — his victims seem to seek him out, too; “many of the female hunters after notoriety attempted to win his attentions, and gain, at least, some marks of what they might term affection” (Polidori 2008: 39). This suggests that moral decay doesn’t just come from without, it also comes from within, it is invited, and Lord Strongmore is simply its agent. This is also true for his non-sexual victims, who fall prey to him because of their internal weakness and vice. Therefore, when Strongmore crosses social boundaries, “he does so with the collaboration of his victims” (Punter 2013: 103).

Even his relationship with Aubrey is marked by his implicit collaboration which stems from his naive idealism and passivity. Despite being a victim, Aubrey is not described in a particularly flattering way; “He had, hence, that high romantic feeling of honour and candour, which daily ruins so many milliners’ apprentices” and “He thought, in fine, that the dreams of poets were the realities of life” (Polidori 2008: 40). His naivety allows him to be drawn by Lord Strongmore’s seductive magnetism without noticing his corrupting influence before it was too late. This causes him to assume a passive role in their relationship, as opposed to a more dominant, more traditionally masculine one, further allowing Lord Strongmore to position himself as his guide and mentor, abusing their homosocial (Sedgwick 1985:1) relationship. Strongmore’s approach towards Aubrey is not, at least explicitly, marked by erotic desire. Instead, their bond is more similar to that of mentor and student. However, Strongmore perverts this homosocial bond by using it to prey on women in Aubrey’s life, particularly his sister. In another example of the breaking of conventional bourgeois morality and his predatoriness, Strongmore ignores the conventions of the “exchange of women between men” (Rubin 1975: 171) and goes straight for Aubrey’s sister without heeding his wishes and demands.

However, Lord Strongmore’s and Aubrey’s relationship might point towards an implicit homophobic anxiety. While Strongmore doesn’t pursue Aubrey sexually like he does his female victims, his character is based on Lord Byron, who was infamous for his sexual escapades, which included relationships with men and boys. For example, in 1816, Caroline Lamb claimed that Byron had “confessed that from his boyhood he had been

in the practice of unnatural crime—that Rushton was one of those whom he had corrupted—by whom he had been attended as a page [...] He mentioned 3 [*sic!*] schoolfellows whom he had thus perverted” (Marchand 1976: 230). If Strongmore is understood as a parodic representation of Byron, then his character can be understood as imbued with implicit homoerotic tendencies, despite their not being shown explicitly. Furthermore, homosexuality was until relatively recently often described as “unspeakable” and “unmentionable” (Sedgwick 1985: 94), and there is always something unspeakable about Strongmore for Aubrey, until “His incoherence at last became so great, that he was confined to his chamber” (p. 56). While it would be an overstatement to read their relationship as an explicitly homosexual one, some passages can be seen as participating in an implicit homosexual panic, which is part of a general moral anxiety. However, the blueprint for a seductive and sexually transgressive vampire set in “The Vampyre” served to inspire future generations of Gothic writers who would make explicit many of the implicit and subdued elements of the story.

3. The ambiguous lesbianism of “Carmilla”

“Carmilla” by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) expands on the themes present implicitly and explicitly in “The Vampyre” and other early vampire stories and sets the tone for the vampire stories to come in the following decades and the following century. Despite being less prominent in popular culture than *Dracula* or *The Vampire Chronicles*, it has always garnered much attention in critical circles due to its thematisation of lesbian sexuality, as well as class and ethnic tension in Sheridan’s Ireland, even though those anxieties are projected onto Austria. The novella’s approach to sexuality is particularly interesting due to its focus on a homosocial/homosexual relationship between two women and its somewhat ambiguous representation of the issue. Its relative explicitness also makes it unique in its time period, when authors tended to describe sexuality in oblique terms rather than discuss it openly, especially when it came to homoerotic desire. It’s also poignant that the novella is narrated by Laura, Carmilla’s victim, and the reader is privy to her innermost thoughts and transgressive desires, which is not often the case in the Gothic, where transgressive desires are typically mediated by and filtered through the lens of a narrator who doesn’t experience them.

Laura doesn't shy away from sharing her infatuation with Carmilla from the very start of the novel, she says that she "felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed" (Le Fanu 2007: 19) and reminds the reader that "I told you that I was charmed with her in most particulars" (Le Fanu 2007: 21). Such descriptions are "The traditional combination of a vampire's simultaneous magnetism and repulsiveness" (Costello-Sullivan 2013: xviii), but as the novella progresses, the magnetism seems to triumph over the repulsiveness.

William Veeder states that the novella deals with "The question posed frequently by conservative Victorians—Do women have passion?" (Veeder 1980: 198). The answer in the novella is an emphatic "Yes!", but whether this is seen as a positive or negative thing is ambiguous, as it "Expresses a hysterical fear of sexually and domestically powerful women or operates as a sympathetic study of women stereotyped as dangerous by Victorian culture" (Killeen 2013: 99–100). Both readings have had their proponents in critical circles. For example, Renee Fox claims that "Female homoeroticism in *Carmilla* stands not as a sign of sexual perversity within a binary system, but as a figuration of Irish class politics that precludes binary oppositions" (Fox 2013: 112), and Elizabeth Signorotti takes an even more optimistic stance, describing the novel as "Le Fanu's narrative of female empowerment" (Signorotti 1996: 608). On the other hand, Robert Tracy states that "Le Fanu deliberately heightened this [sexual] anxiety by introducing a kind of sex he would have considered illicit in order to emphasize the unnatural in his supernatural tale" (Tracy 1998: 66). Considering Le Fanu's conservative Anglo-Irish background and the period when the novella was written, it seems more likely that he used homoeroticism as an addition to Carmilla's unnaturalness and the threat that she poses to the established order, both in terms of the safety of Laura and her family, but also in terms of the sex/gender system of the 19th century, which strictly insisted on heterosexuality, strong paternal authority, and female submissiveness. However, unlike in many other vampire stories, this process is not straightforward, and the representations of Laura and Carmilla are rather ambiguous.

On the one hand, Laura's first-person account may invite readers to sympathise with her, especially when it comes to modern readers. Laura's voice is the dominant one in the narrative, and "Le Fanu refrains from heavy-handed moralizing, leaving open the possibility that Laura's and

Carmilla's vampiric relationship is sexually liberating and for them highly desirable" (Signorotti 1996: 611). However, while the lack of explicit judgement and moralising may allow space for reading the story as one of sexual liberation, it does not mean that the moralising is not implicit and aimed at Laura as well as Carmilla. Laura, unlike many female victims of vampire attacks, is not a passive victim and recipient of the vampire's passion. She is an active and willing participant in the seduction who at times makes advances (although not explicitly sexual) at Carmilla. She actively seeks to get closer to Carmilla and learn more about her, saying that "Once or twice, indeed, I did attack her more directly" (Le Fanu 2007: 22). Therefore, the threat to the dominant order comes not just from outside, from Carmilla, but also from the inside, from Laura, who "mirrors her desire" (Fox 2013: 115), so the horror of the story may be said to come from anxiety caused by women gaining sexual and domestic power and independence. The novella "depicts a society where men increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women assume aggressive roles" (Signorotti 1996: 611). However, this breakdown of male power and Laura's "Alienation from male authority" (Veeder 1998: 203) are not necessarily presented as something desirable, but rather as a cause for alarm and a source of anxiety and fear.

The ending of the novella retains the ambiguity that pervades the rest of it. On the one hand, the ending is a fairly conventional one. A group of men assemble to employ the "extreme phallic corrective" (Signorotti 1996: 624); they stake Carmilla's body, cut off her head, burn her body, and spread the ashes over a river, ensuring that she will not return. The threat of the vampire is gone, and with it the threat of homoeroticism and female empowerment. The sex/gender system of the bourgeois family is at least seemingly restored, as Laura comments: "The disappearance of Carmilla was followed by the discontinuance of my nightly sufferings" (Le Fanu 2007: 80). However, Laura's narrative does not abruptly end after the staking of Carmilla. At the very end, she says

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 have heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door. (Le Fanu 2007: 85)

It is telling that even after being assured of Carmilla's being a vampire, Laura still remembers her, at least partly, as beautiful and attractive. This, coupled with the briefness of her mention of Laura's extermination, may point towards the idea that the sex/gender system has not been fully restored, and instead, the homoerotic desire that Laura has for Carmilla has only been suppressed, but not extinguished, which makes the vampire hunters' efforts futile. However, Laura's continuing thoughts about Carmilla can also simply be a result of trauma and an attempt to resolve it, rather than a sign of her affection. Furthermore, even if Laura is understood as being still somewhat infatuated with Carmilla, this was not necessarily meant as a positive development; it can also be seen as a sign that the threat of subversion is always present on the inside, which can further be seen as an additional sign of paranoia over female empowerment. However, the novella surely leaves an unusual amount of space for sympathy and identification with the transgressive characters in the story, allowing for a range of varying and even contradictory readings. It also marked a possible change in the direction of the representation of transgressive sexuality in Gothic fiction, which was expanded on by certain 20th-century authors, such as Anne Rice.

4. The subversiveness of *Interview with the Vampire*

The first seminal Gothic novelist whose fiction embraced homoeroticism unambiguously, along with the subversive potential of the vampire was Anne Rice (1941–2021). This twist may stem from Rice's personal support for gay rights (O'Connor 2005), but also from the growing acceptance of homosexuality in the public sphere. While the gay liberation movement still had a long way ahead of it, its efforts following the Stonewall Riots had made some progress, and homosexuality was increasingly becoming less of a taboo, especially compared to the repressive 19th century in which the two previously mentioned stories are set. Additionally, fantastic stories, such as Gothic horror in general, provide a convenient site for discussing taboos, and even more importantly, for identifying with them. The projection of a taboo behaviour such as homosexuality onto mythical creatures such as vampires can make it more palatable for the general audience, while allowing the LGB reader to identify with a sexually transgressive character in an oblique manner, "feel[ing] safe enjoying the alternative male/male

relations that the producers [authors] develop in this space" (Schopp 1997: 239). Furthermore, Rice uses homoeroticism to gain greater literary freedom for herself, claiming that using a heterosexual couple would lead to the novel being perceived as just another romance, while a homosexual relationship allowed her to "deal with the real essence of dominance and submission" (Riley 1996: 49). Rice also parodies the bourgeois family through the triangle between Lestat, Louis, and Claudia, going so far as to parody even the process of conception itself. Additionally, the world she created in the first three instalments of *The Vampire Chronicles* is profoundly atheistic, with a complete lack of a godhead and characters wandering aimlessly, unable to find meaning, which is in stark opposition to a lot of vampire fiction, which includes at least some amount of religious moralising and typically serves to confirm religious doctrine. Rice thus "turned the vampire paradigm on its head" (Benefiel 2004: 261) by subverting some of the most common Gothic tropes. The following discussion will focus on *Interview with the Vampire*, as the prime example of Rice's subversion of the Gothic and harnessing its transgressive potential.

While *Interview with the Vampire* is not graphic in its descriptions of sexuality, it is charged with a great deal of homoeroticism from the very beginning. Louis comments, "I refused to look at him, to be spellbound by the sheer beauty of his appearance" (Rice 2002: 14), and later on, "He was no more human to me than a biblical angel" (Rice 2002: 17). Typically, in a vampire story, transgressive desire exists between the vampire and their victim, where the victim is a more or less a passive recipient. While such a relationship also exists here at the beginning, most of the homoerotic desire described in the novel is shared between two vampires, with occasional displays of desire between vampire and victim. This change of dynamics helps to neutralise or at least reduce the effect of horror that typically accompanies transgressive sexuality in the Gothic. The vampire is no longer an alien intruder who infects the victim with transgressive desires, but rather an object of fascination, affinity, and magnetic attraction which is not perceived as revolting by the recipient. *Interview with the Vampire* shares this combination of attraction and repulsiveness with "Carmilla", but unlike the novella, the narrative stands firmly on the side of the magnetism, especially when it comes to the sexual component. While Louis finds Lestat morally detestable, the attraction he feels is undeniable. Neutralising the shock coming from facing such a transgression by placing homoeroticism between two more or less equal sides, Rice naturalises homosexual desire,

turning it into an inherent part of the vampire instead of a threat and a source of horror. This effect is enhanced by the fact that the story is a confessional narrative from the perspective of the vampire Louis, which invites sympathy for a type of character that typically invites disgust and repulsion. In “Carmilla”, the narrative can also be said to invite sympathy for Laura and her desire for Carmilla, but the story is still shrouded in ambiguity, while the titular vampire is clearly described as a threat. On the other hand, *Interview with the Vampire* is perfectly unambiguous in its representations of homoeroticism and invites the reader to side with the vampires.

However, the homoeroticism exhibited in the novel does not lead to physical love; it always remains on the level of fascination, adoration, and desire. Louis even disdains physical love, saying, “it was the pale shadow of killing” (Rice 2002: 207). This might be partly due to the constraints of the time, as graphic descriptions of (homo)sexual activity would have probably impeded the mainstream success of the novel. However, erotic desire seems to, at least in Louis’ case, counteract the death drive and provide an escape from the misery of both human and vampire existence, and may be seen as an extreme expression of a yearning for companionship. This is particularly obvious in Louis’ relationship with Armand, whom he instantly sees as an object of desire and a potential partner, with whom he can escape damnation and abject loneliness.

Rice also makes “the nuclear family of vampires a major theme in her novel” (Benefiel 2004: 263), which is uncommon for a vampire novel, where the vampire typically “threat[ens] the security of the bourgeois family” (Punter & Byron 2004: 269). Even in cases where we see vampires forming something vaguely similar to a family, it’s seen as a perversion that must be destroyed to preserve the nuclear family. Instead, Rice uses the vampire family to parody the nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and even the natural process of reproduction. Louis specifically compares the process of being turned into a vampire to breastfeeding, saying that he experienced “for the first time since infancy the special pleasure of sucking nourishment, the body focused with the mind upon one vital source” (Rice 2002: 20). This parodies and even profanes motherhood and conception. Not only is mother’s milk replaced with blood, but the role of the mother is here taken by Lestat, despite his being male, which turns the natural process and traditional roles upside-down. Lestat exhibits his motherly urge again, before the creation of the vampire Claudia, saying,

"I am like a mother [...] I want a child!" (Rice 2002: 88). In both cases, Lestat acts as a single mother, able to procreate and nurture offspring, without a mate. However, gender roles in the novel are in constant flux, and both Lestat and Louis refer to themselves as Claudia's fathers, with Louis emphasising that "She's our daughter" (Rice 2002: 92). Thus, Lestat returns to a male role, but their family is still in transgression of the typical norms of the family, as it's not just a family of vampires, but also one formed by a homosexual couple. In addition to this, the border between parent and lover is also occasionally blurred, with Louis describing himself and Claudia as "Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover" (Rice 2002: 100), and often using rather sensuous terms when talking about her. However, the boundary is never fully broken, as Louis more consistently describes himself as her father and his behaviour towards her is generally fatherly, complete with a crisis during which Claudia demands her own coffin, in a parody of parent-adolescent child relationship. In this regard, *Interview with the Vampire* is again similar to "Carmilla", where the vampire can be said to become a motherly figure to Laura at certain points, in addition to being her ancestor. However, the incestuous implications in "Carmilla" are most likely an addition to Carmilla's otherworldliness, while in *Interview with the Vampire*, they are a means of parody and subversion. With its treatment of sexuality and the family, *Interview with the Vampire* turns the bourgeois sex/gender system on its head, as love and desire between men is normalised and naturalised, gender roles within the family are subverted, and even the biological functions of men and women in the process of reproduction are inverted, at least symbolically.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to describe and examine the general tendencies in the use of the vampire for discussing transgressive sexuality and the transgressive in general in Gothic fiction. The works discussed in the paper are chosen due to their impact on Gothic horror, as well as their overall influence on the genre as a whole. This allows for the creation of a broad outline of how the Gothic treats transgressive sexuality and the breaking of the sex/gender system. Of course, the analysis here focuses only on a small part of the whole corpus of vampire fiction, and there are undoubtedly nuances and details that do not fit neatly into this outline.

However, it can be safely said that the Gothic has the general tendency to present transgressive sexuality and the breaking of social norms in general as a threat to the dominant order. This, typically, isn't done to question or challenge the order, but rather to uphold it and get rid of its anxieties and fears at least in fiction. In other words, what is usually under scrutiny in Gothic fiction is the transgressive figure of the vampire with its taboo-breaking, and not the established social order. The Gothic typically defends the values of the author's milieu rather than challenge them. "The Vampyre" can be seen as a castigation of the decadent aristocracy from the viewpoint of the bourgeoisie. Lord Strongmore is sexually voracious and has a love of corruption, and the fear of such desire and behaviour is harnessed to tell a cautionary moral tale. "Carmilla" is more explicit with its thematisation of homosexual desire and points towards anxiety about female sexuality and empowerment. However, it leaves some space for identification and sympathy with Laura and her transgressive desire for Carmilla. *Interview with the Vampire* is one of the rare cases in which the subversive potential of the vampire is used for subversion. The narrative invites the reader to sympathise with the vampire protagonist Louis, along with his homoerotic desire for Lestat and Armand. The novel also skilfully employs the vampire to create a parody of the patriarchal family and heteronormative gender roles. However, the conservative strain remains ever present in most Gothic literature.

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