

# Journal of Dracula Studies

---

Volume 1 No. 1

Article 6

---

1999

## The Influence of Dracula on the Lesbian Vampire Film

Sharon A. Russell  
*Indiana State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Russell, Sharon A. (1999) "The Influence of Dracula on the Lesbian Vampire Film," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol1/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dracula Studies by an authorized editor of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact [czerny@kutztown.edu](mailto:czerny@kutztown.edu).

---

## The Influence of Dracula on the Lesbian Vampire Film

### Cover Page Footnote

Sharon Russell, Professor of Communications and Women's Studies at Indiana State University, is the author of *Stephen King, and A Guide to African Cinema*, both published by Greenwood Press.

## The Influence of *Dracula* on the Lesbian Vampire Film

Sharon A. Russell

[Sharon Russell, Professor of Communications and Women's Studies at Indiana State University, is author of *Stephen King* and *A Guide to African Cinema*, both published by Greenwood Press.]

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is one of the major sources of films dealing with female vampires, especially those portraying lesbian relationships. Its story of the vampiric love between two women that lives on even after the death of the title character is often seen as a version which foregrounds affection and passion. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, while influenced by the earlier story, is the major cinematic source for the image of the male vampire who can embody aspects of the lover, but who is most often associated with more violent manifestations of the vampire as monster. I am interested in the extent to which the *Dracula* story has taken over the earlier story so that, even in a film that acknowledges *Carmilla*, many of the traits of the vampires actually derive from the Bram Stoker version. An understanding of the alteration of the traits associated with vampires in each version raises interesting questions about the presentation of the female, the lesbian relationship, and the role of the patriarchy. Rather than attempting to survey all of the films with female vampires as central characters or even those adapted from Le Fanu, I will deal with a film that purports to recreate the *Carmilla* story, *The Vampire Lovers*, (Roy Ward Baker, 1970, AIP) and the recent film *Nadja* (Michael Almereyda, 1994, Kino Link), that develops the Bram Stoker version of the vampire story.

Many critics have acknowledged both *The Vampire Lovers*' relative faithfulness as an adaptation of *Carmilla* and the basic change that occurs because of its being reframed as the story told by a male vampire hunter rather than by Laura as in the Le Fanu tale. The shift to a male perspective also facilitates the more pornographic aspects of the film where the interactions of the large-breasted female central characters, often in semi-nude states, are offered for men to watch. But there are subtler changes that further alter the character of the narrative and seem to bring the film closer to the *Dracula* tradition than the romantic encounters of *Carmilla*.

While the events that are repeated in each version occur in the same order in film and story, their details are shifted. Laura learns of the death of the General's niece, Bertha, through a letter in the story. In the film the viewer sees the bite marks which cause the death of Laura (the Bertha character) as well as the relationship between this woman and the vampire. The viewer also sees the mother establish the situation for the character, who is first called Marcilla, to stay with Laura. While the reader is not yet aware of the cause of the death, the viewer knows of the vampiric source, Laura's friend, Marcilla. The presence of a vampire is immediately associated with violence rather than love because of the opening sequence of the film featuring Baron von Hertog destroying a female vampire who exhibits the usual fangs and blood draining capabilities of *Dracula* at the same time that she also attempts sexual attraction to distract him from his task. The new opening also establishes the heterosexuality of this vampire. Her victim is a male, and she also comes on to the Baron in an attempt to prevent his attack.

The other significant addition to the opening of the film is the introduction of the male romantic interest, Karl. He is presented as Laura's boyfriend at the ball, but later is recruited by Emma's father to watch her in his absence. He becomes central to the resolution of the film when he arrives at the house in time to rescue Emma from *Carmilla*. The early introduction of a male alternative to the lesbian love offered by Marcilla/*Carmilla* undermines the effectiveness of a possible positive portrayal of the female relationships. Even at the ball Emma tells Laura how good looking Karl is, establishing a heterosexual norm which is disturbed by *Carmilla*. The male love interest also recalls Lucy's loves in *Dracula*, and Karl is every bit as bland as her men. The way he can later shift his attention to Emma marks him as an all-purpose young male figure who is placed in the story to counter the lesbian relationships and assert the importance of heterosexuality at all levels of the narrative. The triangle generated by Marcilla, Laura, and Karl is clearly demonstrated in the scene in the ball when Laura thinks Marcilla is staring at Karl, but he

is aware the young woman is actually looking at Laura. An instance of a woman expressing desire toward another woman is deflected by the male intervention in interpreting the gaze. The patriarchal intervention suggested by the addition of Karl is further developed through the unnamed caped figure who seems to control the female vampires. He enters the ball to summon Marcilla's mother and is present when Marcilla/Carmilla embarks on a seduction. The suggestion of male domination recalls Dracula's interaction with vampire women both in the novel and in films.

While the male figures provide a context which emphasizes the turn away from the female world of the original, the associations of Carmilla with the type of vampire reflected in the figure of Dracula further distance *The Vampire Lovers* from the story. The film retains the images of the cat visiting the young women, but the actual visualizations of vampiric encounters change a love relationship into an attack with the same ambiguity present in those films which attempt to transform Dracula into a lover (such as the John Badham *Dracula*). The bloody death-giving fangs Carmilla reveals turn her into a predator. By the end of the film the sympathy which might have been generated for a woman who can not stop loving too well is lost by her absorption into the more familiar image of the monster who will stop at nothing to achieve success.

Just as the opening of the film suggests the way the film will retain the major narrative elements of the story while altering their effect, the ending demonstrates the implications of those changes. First Carmilla's role as sexual predator is emphasized. The story, told from the point of view of Laura, traces the vagaries of a growing love between two women, a love punctuated by a needle-like pain which Laura suffers and which seems to be connected to her failing health. Throughout the film the relationship between Carmilla and Emma is undercut by Carmilla's need to possess her friend. Aside from the pornographic implication of the bathing scene so well described by Andrea Weiss in *Vampires and Violets* (92-93), Emma's loss of innocence and identity is represented by her wearing Carmilla's dress at the end of the scene. As the film progresses Carmilla increasingly resembles Dracula in her need to protect her prey. She solidifies her position in the house by seducing Emma's governess who is left in charge when her father leaves. The patriarchy, through Renton, the butler, attempts to regain control. Renton introduces the traditional garlic flowers and cross into Emma's room by claiming the authority of the doctor, more indications of the influence of Dracula and the patriarchy. Carmilla manages to seduce the butler so he countermands his own orders, and then she kills him just as he thinks he will receive a sexual reward for doing as she asked. While the men gather to destroy the last of the vampires the Baron had failed to erase, Carmilla attempts to escape with Emma. As Karl rides to the house to save her, Carmilla kills the governess who begs to go with her. This vicious attack which horrifies her is Emma's first evidence of the true nature of her lover. When Karl enters she runs to his arms. He manages to send Carmilla back to her grave where shots of her in her coffin are alternated with shots of Emma in bed where she screams as the men decapitate Carmilla.

The story ends as Laura thinks she hears Carmilla's step; their love survives. In the film the triumph of the patriarchy is matched by the redemption of heterosexual love from the threat of the lesbian. Emma ends up in Karl's arms with no sense of blame for the young man who can move from love to love so quickly. Even Carmilla must exhibit bisexuality in her seduction of Renton. Whatever threat might have existed from the presence of lesbian relationships is countered by the revival of heterosexual relationships at the end of the film. The kisses between Renton and Carmilla are more openly passionate as is his fondling of her breast. In the opening, the female vampire's naked nipple touches the Baron's chest, but no such contact between the women is visualized. The coupling of death and destruction with love transforms Carmilla from lover to monster as evidenced by Emma's revulsion at the end. The addition of elements associated with Dracula help demonize Carmilla. But rather than adding a certain element of attractive danger to the seductive powers of the vampire as in Badham's *Dracula*, Carmilla's fangs reinforce the stereotype of the predatory lesbian. The male domination of this film transforms a lesbian romance into a pornographic male oriented spectacle. But the use of visual effects associated with Bram Stoker's vampire destroys any possible attraction for the female viewer in the love relationship.

Some of the problems in dealing with a lesbian relationship might be attributed to the period when *The Vampire Lovers* was made, as Bonnie Zimmerman indicates in her essay "Daughters of Darkness: The

Lesbian Vampire on Film.” She suggests men felt secure enough in their power to “flirt with lesbianism and female violence against men.” Weiss disagrees with Zimmerman and instead sees the emergence of the lesbian vampire at this point as an expression of the threats posed by the rise of feminist demands. One might think we have come a long way in the nineties. This decade had provided many new ways to look at vampires in film from the timorous suggestion of the even more cinematically forbidden homosexual love of *Interview with the Vampire* to reclaiming of a heroic past in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*. But the image of the lesbian vampire has not been revised. With the sexually explicit films now permitted, lesbian sexuality no longer provides the voyeuristic thrill for those who can go into their local video store and get their pornography straight. The recent film *Nadja* has a bisexual female vampire as the central character. Its treatment of the lesbian union is some indication of the status of this relationship at the end of this century.

The New York locations and New York based production lead the viewer to expect a certain level of sophistication in the treatment of the female vampire. The film opens with Nadja and a prospective male victim in one of the many bars which serve as settings. This first scene sets much of the tone for the rest of the film as Nadja moves from an ironic discussion of the difficulty of finding food after 10:00 p.m. in Europe as opposed to its ready availability in the lively night life of New York. The first view of the reflective side of her character is revealed with her expression of her need to simplify her life. It is not long before her true nature is revealed in the first of a series of sequences where the supernatural is suggested through the use of Fisher\_Price Pixelvision. Nadja attacks and drains her first victim, the man she met and spoke with in the bar. She is immediately depicted as foreign through her accent and the exotic Indian style scarf she wears over her head. Her early kill also establishes her role as the predator in the film. The Pixelvision sequence also introduces one of the major themes. The film cuts to an image of a staked vampire, and Nadja looks up, her face dripping blood as she verbalizes the event, the death of her father. While the exact identity of her father is not completely clear the next sequence identifies him and many of the other major characters.

The remainder of the establishing sequences set up a semi serious/semi humorous updating of the Dracula story. While the viewer can already place Nadja in the category of the troubled modern vampire, her relationship with the bloodsucking tradition has yet to be clarified. In a narrative where all of the characters eventually form attachments through blood, either of kinship or affection, the opening provides a kind of list of up-to-date versions of classic characters. The film shifts from Nadja’s feeding to a young man ineptly sparring with an older partner. Jim, one of the vampire hunters, receives a bloody nose when his wife Lucy (a buzzer goes off for the initiated) enters to give him the news of his uncle’s incarceration. Lucy’s action as she bends over Jim and attempts to wipe his bloody nose is both a reflection of Nadja’s interaction with her victim and a foreshadowing of Lucy’s own bloody nose later in the film. While the film does not immediately establish the relationship between the two women, the viewer who is well schooled in vampire lore makes the connection when Lucy tells Jim his uncle is in jail for murder. He has staked his victim through the heart. The identity of the victim is confirmed when Nadja and Renfield come to claim the body at the morgue. She reels off the list of his names, among them Dracula.

The introduction of the familiar is completed when Jim and his Uncle Van Helsing converse in a diner after his uncle’s release from jail. The casting of Peter Fonda as Van Helsing conflates two pasts and two legends, the independent cinematic history of Peter Fonda in his present incarnation as a long-haired has-been, and his role as a Van Helsing who carries around his bicycle instead of riding his motorcycle and wears antique looking Norfolk jackets. His description of the Count’s death is not that of the difficult and heroic actions usually associated with this event in traditional films. As Van Helsing states, “He was like Elvis in the end, just going through the motions. The magic was gone.” He suggests a story that may just about have run its course. The introduction of Nadja might suggest a new direction for the narrative, and the connections between past and present are only the beginning of the complex bloody relationships that spread through the film.

The connections of love and blood between the characters form the core of the narrative that is then injected into the traditional search and destroy vampire story. Nadja believes her father’s death frees her from his domination, but in fact she will be unable to divorce herself from the pull of her heritage. His

body may be transformed into ashes, but she will carry him with her just as she hauls around the urn that contains his remains. The problems of the Dracula family are mirrored in those of Van Helsing and his relatives. While Lucy has never liked him, he must eventually reveal the fact that he is actually Jim's father and thus her father-in-law. Van Helsing is the only living father in this world of dead parents.

The emphasis on family does not have to include an endorsement of heterosexual relationships, and one would not expect such an attitude from a narrative so willing to play with tradition. The inevitable meeting between Nadja and Lucy in another bar suggests the possibility of a new configuration of the tradition. The one extended love scene in the film is between the two women, a sequence which includes the introduction of Lucy's pet tarantula, Bela, and Nadja's upset when Lucy plays with a Christmas tree ornament vampire head which shakes and shrieks. The scene's more serious and suggestive elements hint at the implications of the merging of menstrual blood with the vampire tradition. But Nadja is most interested in exploring the "pain of fleeting joy." After she explains her origins, the daughter of the strange union of a peasant mother and Dracula that produced twins. While the scene presents a love relationship, it does not pander to pornographic voyeurism and hints at more than it reveals. Lucy is transformed, and Nadja expresses her love for Lucy when she returns to her home and Renfield who is identified as her slave. Since he is the last person she has turned to her way of life, a lesbian relationship is only a part of her bisexual identity.

The role of the lesbian relationship between Nadja and Lucy is difficult to determine. Nadja obviously makes a distinction between those she attacks and immediately kills and those she loves. While Lucy is later placed into a kind of trance that draws her to Nadja much as Mina's mind connects her to Dracula, Lucy does not reject her husband and their heterosexuality. Nadja is also in love with her ailing twin brother Edgar. To add to the familial complexity Edgar is in love with his nurse, Cassandra, who is Jim's half sister, and she loves him. Lucy and Nadja form the only lesbian love pairing in the film, and their relationship is built on a single contact. While Nadja may proclaim her love and call Lucy to her, she seems to be more interested in her brother.

At the end of the film all of the characters come together in the ancestral home in Transylvania. By this point in the film blood sucking has been replaced by transfusions. Edgar is revived by the same plasma treatments Nadja claims to use, part of their father's provisions for their future. However the ultimate transfusion takes place as Van Helsing and Jim hunt the vampires to remove Lucy's connection to Nadja and fulfill the destiny of their names. As they wander through the basement of the castle, Nadja initiates a transfusion with Cassandra. Renfield attempts to protect his love and master. When he is unsuccessful he commits suicide by falling on a stake. In a reenactment of the traditional finale, Van Helsing shows Edgar how to perform the staking ritual on his sister. It would seem a kind of order has been restored when the two remaining couples embrace. The stability of heterosexuality has been established. But a voice-over reveals the true transgression in the film resides on another level. The final transfusion has actually transferred the persons of Cassandra and Nadja. The closing images of Nadja's marriage with Edgar present the ultimate transgression in the film, incest.

The marriage of Edgar and Nadja raises many questions about the attitude toward traditional heterosexual couples in the film. From the perspective of the stereotypes generated by the genre, Nadja would be seen as the manipulative female predator who seduces young women and young men. The more detailed presentation of the lesbian seduction could then be viewed as an element in the usual demonization of the seductive female, especially one with lesbian or bisexual affiliations. But Nadja's transformation into Cassandra alters the traditional genre expectations. On one level the sexual transgression of incest decreases the impact of the lesbian love affair. A lesbian union is much less of a transgression than an incestual one. On another level the substitution of incestual love for lesbian love could also be a means of trivializing it and valorizing heterosexuality at any cost. Nadja's taking over of the body of Cassandra can be either the ultimate union or the ultimate predation.

The union of two vampires in a marriage ceremony in *Nadja* does also reveal the hypocrisy behind this cultural ritual and the transformation of the couple into a family. *The Vampire Lovers* also questions the stability of the family, but in a way which does not imply a critique of the institution. Both films feature fragmented families that have difficulty dealing with the threat posed by a vampire. The increased role of

patriarchal figures in the film about Carmilla as opposed to the original story forces the formation of a new heterosexual couple at the end and undercuts the importance of the lesbian relationship. The addition of vampiric traits associated with Dracula turns Carmilla into a predator rather than a lover. Nadja is her father's daughter, but she expresses a wish to divorce herself from her heritage. The patriarchy is not necessarily a positive force in the film. While Dracula's heritage is negative, those who oppose him are for the most part bumbling fools who only partially understand what is happening. Jim is ineffective boxing in the gym, and is at his best comforting Lucy. He is not a typical example of the patriarchal domination exhibited at the end of the traditional vampire film. Both he and Lucy fight Renfield before he gives up and commits suicide. In this context the lesbian relationship becomes another challenge to the patriarchy, a stage in the film's more general attack on conventional values which culminates in incest. Heterosexuality is not the cure for the lesbian love affair. We still have yet to find an open and enduring lesbian or homosexual vampire in a loving relationship, but maybe we have come a little closer in the nineties.

### Works Cited

- Le Fanu, Sheridan. "Carmilla." *In a Glass Darkly*. Ed. Robert Tracy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. *Nadja*. Dir. Michael Almereyda. Kino Link, 1994.
- The Vampire Lovers*. Dir. Roy Ward Baker. AIP/Hammer, 1970.
- Weiss, Andrea. *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996.