

Ambivalence in Vampire Fiction:
Attraction, Female Sexuality, Abusive Relationships
&
The Gilded Elite

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Introductory Essay

The basis for my senior project all started with the class Alternate Worlds. I sat in the room on the first day intimidated by what I would be working on throughout the semester. I had never written anything fantasy or created my own world with a set of rules that was not based in reality so it was all new to me, but as the first class was closing up, I had an image in my head of a man in a bar, a vampire bar, getting into a fight, getting punched and knocked down, blood spraying out of his mouth, and suddenly I had my world. It really started with the set of graphic assignments to help us visualize the world we would be building. The first assignment was about the currency of our world. We worked through the physical appearance of it, the monetary breakdown, the history of its origin, and even the composition. That was what got me started on a divide between humans and vampires with the difference in their currency. It became a separation between the two sides of this world because of the oppression cast on humans from the vampires. The vampires had a crystal currency system that manifested in paper and coin money, while the humans were delegated to simple coin currency, made of silver as a way of feeling protection from the vampires. My world grew more as I built on more aspects of it, and though the currency has not made an appearance in my story yet, it served as the basis of the entire structure of the society. And while not every detail I created would stay the same throughout the process, they all helped me visualize the world better and figure out what worked well in it. Some things were menial ideas that I would end up scrapping almost immediately, while others snowballed into deeper worldbuilding. In my senior project, you'll see the

beginnings of what will become a longer work of fiction. These are the building blocks and introduction of my main characters and the world they live in.

My idea grew from an image of the bar into two main characters, a human and a vampire, one man and one woman, both different but going for similar goals. The story would change and shift as I found myself understanding one character more than the other, Theo, the begrudging vampire who hates his new form. I loved exploring his internal dilemma and conflict, and I found him to have such an interesting view of the world. But when it came to the character of Vera, the human, I felt stuck. I didn't have an idea of her personality and I felt confined by the story I initially gave her. But, by the end of the semester, I had changes in mind for the story I had set out to write, and it built more because I felt like I could continue the story and expand on it for my senior project.

Around this time is when I really started to think about my story in the terms of my senior project. I always knew I wanted to incorporate a literature side to my project, and it all came together when I started considering expanding on my vampire story. I realized I wanted to do more research on my own to really learn more about vampire origins, vampire tropes, their powers, and other things in relation to the subgenre. I put together a list in my mind of classic vampire stories to read and analyze and critique as a way of building up my knowledge of the vampire subgenre and allow myself to incorporate parts of it I felt would serve my story and play with other parts I felt could be updated or shifted for my setting. Exploring the history of the vampire genre has been educational, creatively invigorating, and eye-opening. The exploration of gender and sexuality within the context of supernatural beings makes the genre compelling on multiple layers. The settings and lore make the dark atmosphere enthralling and attractive, but the genre is capable of exploring other themes important to real life. Seeing the depiction of

women within these stories is fascinating in relation to the time they were written in and through the lens of today. There is also a lot to be said about the way female characters were written by men vs. written by women. This is seen in how Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, both men, write their female characters like Carmilla and Lucy, and how S.T. Gibson, a woman, writes her female character Constanta. There were so many ways I could dissect the vampire stories I read, but the ambivalence present in them was the most prominent and compelling for me because of the many ways it was depicted. It is present in the depiction of sexuality, both a person expressing their sexuality and a person experiencing sexual attraction, as well as same-sex attraction between certain characters and how deeply rooted non-hetero sexualities are in the classics. And it is also seen in how vampires are presented either lacking ambivalence or themselves being ambivalent in their existence. And so much more that I explore in my essay.

My research is only the tip of the iceberg, and in all honesty, I am nowhere near done with it. First, I think I can gain a lot by revisiting these texts in the future to analyze different themes present within them. Second, I plan to expand my reading pool so as I continue writing my story, I continue to learn about the different ways vampires are written and used to explore certain themes. As well as inspiration, all these texts serve as inspiration for me in one way or another. And that is also why this is just the beginning for my story. I have laid the groundwork, one that I think is a bit more solid and has more chance for longevity than the original one I created. As mentioned before, I struggled with Vera's character, and while I have still experienced those same feelings, I have landed in a better place with where I plan to take her. My work on *The Gilded Elite* has been rocky to say the least. I have lost inspiration and reignited it multiple times. It became a daunting task I set out for myself, one that I felt intimidated by in the beginning, sitting in that classroom because I did not think myself capable of creating such a

complex world. And I still question my ability. But this is a work in progress, and I truly would not have been able to get to this place with my story if it were not for my senior project. There is a lot of work to still be done. A lot of heavy lifting in revising, outlining and research, and it terrifies me. But these characters have found a home in my head, one they cannot just move out of. They will continue to blossom and grow. Their stories will evolve, and I will not be able to stop them, and I would not want to. Writing is a never-ending process, except for when it needs to end. There must be a final product, and this is mine for now. So, while it might be contradictory, this is not an end yet for these characters. This is both a final product and a work in progress. An endgame and the beginning.

**Ambivalence in Vampire Fiction:
Attraction, Female Sexuality, & Abusive Relationships**

Vampires in literature often feature ambivalent characters and themselves are often ambivalent in their portrayal of human desire and sexuality. Vampire stories tend to focus on these themes in relation to female characters, as well as the scrutiny that comes with being a woman with desires. *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, one of the kick-starters of the vampire genre, exhibits ambivalence in the lead character, Laura, and the question of her attraction, whether platonic or not, towards the vampire Carmilla. *Carmilla*'s successor, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, also portrays ambivalence in relation to the vampires in the story, expanding on some of the themes present in *Carmilla*, from Dracula's brides to Lucy's transition into vampirism. *Dracula* explores the existence of ambivalence towards vampires and the absence of it within vampires themselves. In *A Dowry of Blood* ambivalence is explored in the complexities of an abusive relationship and how those conflicting feelings and experiences cause trauma and complacency, where vampires are given the agency of ambivalence towards other vampires, Vampires within their classic stories are not given the grace of ambivalence and it is merely through the human lens that readers see an ambivalent perspective, and the ambivalence in the context of vampires is an exploration of female sexuality, and repulsion of its freedom. The vampires exhibit no ambivalence within themselves, as is the case with Lucy, lacking any form of nuance or humanity as condemnation of a woman's sexual liberty, whereas a human's ambivalence toward a vampire, again often a female vampire, is through the questioning of desire and fear toward a woman's sexual expression. In more recently written vampire stories,

the perspective of the vampire is more valued and has more complexities. This is present in Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire*, which I did not get the chance to explore deeply in this paper, but it is another pioneer for the genre. Rice gives her vampires agency and ambivalence, which is seen in how they maintain their humanity even after their transition into vampirism. These new vampires contain both good and bad qualities and still possess their humanity, they are not simply villains or monsters.

Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu explores complex female relationships through the perspective of the lead character Laura and displays her ambivalence through her wanting and craving of a connection with a woman, but her fear and apprehension at the affection she receives from the vampire Carmilla. As a young woman who craves a female friendship, Laura is a perfect candidate to be a victim of Carmilla. Laura craves female connection desperately from the loss of her mother and the isolation within her home. All Laura has ever truly wanted is a friend, and she expects one in the General's niece, but when she finds out the girl has fallen sick and later dies, she loses that connection before she even gets it, leaving her desire for female companionship even stronger. The loss of the General's niece is the direct cause of Carmilla, with her being one of Carmilla's victims, and this works in favor of Carmilla and her actions since it leads to Laura being in a greater state of vulnerability. Laura ends up being much more susceptible to accepting Carmilla into their house, which is evident in her quickness to ask for Carmilla to stay, "Oh! papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us—it would be so delightful. Do, pray" (Le Fanu 11). Laura is much more excited, and she begs for this mysterious girl to come into her life. This being the doing of Carmilla plays into the possibility that Le Fanu is coding sapphic sexuality as predatory. Laura is desperate for that connection, and when Laura and Carmilla do finally come face to face, they are met with an uncanny sense of familiarity. This

leads to our first time seeing Carmilla's manipulation because while Laura is being faced with the same woman she saw those twelve years ago in a horrific experience, she is instead led to believe they are connected when Carmilla describes a similar experience she supposedly had with Laura at the same time. Carmilla then describes their meeting as fated, "at all events it does seem as if we were destined, from our earliest childhood, to be friends" (17), and paints it positively. Carmilla continues her manipulation by relating to Laura when she says she has also never had a friend before and that she longs for a deep connection, "I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you; I have never had a friend—shall I find one now?" (17), thus connecting with her on a deeper level. She coaxes Laura, not really giving her a chance to think for herself, giving her the thought that they are drawn towards each other, then saying she has never had a friend before, already putting their connection above anything else she has experienced. And instead of asking something like "will you be my friend?", she asks it in terms of expectation and the future, "shall I find one now?" But while Laura wants the same thing, she feels apprehension toward this immediate connection, "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion" (17). Her ambivalence and apprehension towards Carmilla's asking for a connection between them becomes a question of either repulsion of Carmilla or a repulsion of Laura's own feelings for Carmilla. There is a constant back and forth throughout the novella of whether Carmilla herself is repulsive or Laura does not understand her own feelings for Carmilla. Yet despite this repulsion, Laura's pull toward Carmilla is stronger, "In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed" (17). And so, the relationship between the two women develops and strengthens throughout the novella, even though Laura feels apprehension.

Throughout the novella, sexuality and sensuality is presented ambivalently in terms of Laura's attraction towards Carmilla. It becomes a question within Laura's apprehensive desire, and whether it is simply a result of Carmilla's assertive behavior and Laura's yearning for female companionship or a genuine connection and attraction. Carmilla's actions are undeniably seductive and flirtatious, and Laura allows it, enjoys it, but doesn't necessarily reciprocate it, as seen here where Laura details Carmilla's affections, "She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear" (20), but then later says, "From these foolish embraces [...] I used to wish to extricate myself" (20). Laura wants to escape from Carmilla's embrace, but she would never go through with it, and one of the reasons for that is how Carmilla would soothe Laura into complacency, "Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms" (20). With the way Carmilla is marketed or talked about today in the context of being an iconic lesbian vampire story, modern readers might be surprised to see the relationship between Laura and Carmilla is not so explicit. On the other end, it is surprising that the novella does not entirely paint their attraction in a negative light. Laura's apprehension is with the underlying suspicion she feels towards Carmilla and what she truly is. She is more apprehensive of the quickness with Carmilla's affection than she is with the affection itself at most times. There are moments where she is uncomfortable with the way Carmilla acts towards her, "It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses" (21). But then later she also says, "I remind you perhaps of someone whom you love; but you must not, I hate it; I don't know you—I don't know myself when you look so and talk so" (21), and here she is pushing back against the affection because it is something she is not

used to, she feels it is not possible for Carmilla to feel so strongly for her so quickly, and so she finds another reason for it, her bearing a likeness to someone from Carmilla's past because she feels a disconnect between herself and Carmilla's words about her. Almost like she is putting up a wall and deflecting from the affection because she doesn't believe she could truly be the reason for it. She may not like the affection from Carmilla because it is coming from another woman, but she also may be feeling conflicted about whether she likes it or not, and whether she feels she deserves it or not. There is a question of repression in her feelings and actions. Laura is potentially unsure of her queerness, whereas Carmilla is not, Carmilla is aware of her attraction towards women, and this is evident in her only targeting women. There are elements of the story that lean towards Le Fanu being against this same-sex attraction, Carmilla being the villain and monster for one. As mentioned previously, Carmilla's actions are coded as predatory in the way she only targets women while also showing attraction to them, and manipulating her victims into trusting her despite the apprehension they feel with her presence. In the context of the story, the choice to structure Carmilla and her confidence and awareness of her same-sex attraction as villainous would support the idea that Le Fanu is centering her sapphic feelings and actions as negative. But the text does not fully denounce Laura and Carmilla's relationship when we see Laura still longing for something from Carmilla, whether she realizes it is sexual in nature or not. Laura's desire to have the portrait of Mircalla Karnstein hung up in her room is one instance of her unknowing attraction towards Carmilla. She is adamant about the resemblance between Mircalla and Carmilla and then insists on having the portrait hung up in her room, something Carmilla notices as romantic, "'And you asked for the picture you think like me, to hang in your room,' she murmured with a sigh, as she drew her arm closer about my waist" (28). Carmilla takes the opportunity to be more intimate with Laura, touching her and emphasizing the fact that

Laura has made such a request. At first Laura does not shy away from Carmilla's touch and she says, "How romantic you are, Carmilla" (28), acknowledging the affectionate gesture. It appears Laura has those same feelings for Carmilla because after Carmilla says, "I have been in love with no one [...] unless it should be with you" (28), Laura thinks to herself, "How beautiful she looked in the moonlight!" (28), commenting on Carmilla's looks, and thus making it clear the attraction she feels. But once Carmilla speaks more deeply, "I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so" (28), Laura separates herself from Carmilla's affection. Laura feels strongly for Carmilla, and she plays with those feelings, allowing the two of them to be flirty with one another, but once it becomes more serious, Laura shies away from it, "I started from her" (28). There is repression and ambivalence in her actions, she is hesitant and conflicted about Carmilla and both her feelings for Carmilla, and vice versa.

The ending of *Carmilla*, and the end of Carmilla, speaks interestingly to the role of gender in the novella. Women play an important part throughout the text, which is to be expected with a female-led story. The connections between women, and Laura's trauma in relation to women especially by the end of the novella, all play an important role in the story, so to see it end with Carmilla being defeated by the male characters is questionable. With the buildup of the relationship between Laura and Carmilla, it seems as though the ending would be one that would show the growth of Laura's character and the tragedy of her having to kill the one woman she formed a connection with. That ending would have been an exploration of Laura and her arc from being harmed and weakened by Carmilla to killing her. And yet with Laura not being a part of Carmilla's demise, it lends itself to the idea that Carmilla and Laura's relationship was not entirely bad, and even though Laura felt apprehensive about their affection, their connection was

too strong for Laura to be the one to end Carmilla's life. It seems Laura did not get real closure for what happened between her and Carmilla since in the 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 the reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door (72).

Eight years later, Laura still pictures Carmilla, imagining that she hears her approaching, as if it is her underlying desire for Carmilla to return to her. Carmilla haunts Laura in ways terrifying and devastating, through the trauma of the pain and suffering she endured from Carmilla's actions and the loss of a relationship she once longed for. Laura pictures and subconsciously hopes for the beautiful and perky Carmilla to reappear in her life, but the ambiguity of her relationship with Carmilla still lingers, and thus leaves the reader to wonder about the true nature of their relationship. This is one reason why the novella has had such a lasting impact, of course because it did help inspire *Dracula*, but also because of the inconclusiveness of whether Laura and Carmilla's relationship should be viewed negatively or positively. Because Le Fanu leaves it open, we are left wondering if the love Laura felt was truly real, and whether the story is or is not condemning it.

The iconic classic *Dracula* by Bram Stoker expands on this ambivalence towards female sexuality through the lens of male characters, bringing an explicitly patriarchal view of a woman's liberation. There is also a lot of influence of *Carmilla* in *Dracula* especially in terms of Lucy, from her relationship with Mina to her transformation into a vampire and ultimately her demise being very similar to Carmilla's. The first instance of ambivalence towards female sexuality is in the scene with Dracula's brides and Jonathan Harker. This scene contains villainous depictions of female sexuality and how Harker feels compelled and repelled by the brides. Harker feels lured to their part of the castle, where Dracula warned him not to enter and

not to fall asleep in, but he does it anyway. When he awakens, the three women stand before him, cast in moonlight and, like Laura, he is allured and repulsed by them, “There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear” (Stoker 45). Harker writes about the women as desirable yet revolting, this dichotomy is present in vampiric desire, and is important because of the monstrosity of the vampire, and because Stoker was directly inspired by Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. That same feeling that Laura felt in *Carmilla* is present here with Harker as well, and the similarity is that a woman’s desire is off-putting. When it came to Laura and Carmilla’s relationship, there was the question of queer desire and whether that in and of itself would be the reason for Laura’s ambivalence, and while that is still important to the story and its depiction of sapphic attraction, that same questioning is seen here in Harker, though it is placed more so to condemn women’s sexuality in general. This is a difference between *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. The themes presented in *Dracula* and the actions taken against them are much more outright condemning these expressions of sexuality. As mentioned before, there is an openness to the ending of *Carmilla* thus leaving the perception of that relationship ambiguous. Le Fanu presents aspects of Carmilla and her sexuality as monstrous and predatory, but he also leaves the terms of their relationship up to the women, giving them the power, and Laura’s feelings while conflicting and confusing, seem to hold real weight for Carmilla, but Stoker gives the power back to the men. This quote displays one of the ways women’s sexuality is demonized in the novel, “There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive” (45), the deliberateness with which the female vampire is sexual, or voluptuous, is what makes her sexuality repulsive, despite it also being attractive. And as this goes on, Harker continues to feel ambivalence towards the vampires, “I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet, and sent the same tingling through the nerves

as her voice, but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood” (45), while the scent of her can be sweet and alluring, it also has something off-putting with the bitter scent of blood, and it is telling of the way men can pick and choose what they desire in women, viewing their sweetness and purity as attractive and alluring, but once there is any bite or agency, a woman’s sexuality becomes offensive. This division in the women’s attractiveness is confusing for Harker to conceive, “such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips” (45). His view of the women is that of soft delicacy, but when it comes to their actions, they portray hard and raw sexuality, creating this ambivalence within Harker that his desires are wrong, “I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (45). His attraction is strong, but the actions of the brides is not allowed by Dracula. He comes in and immediately puts an end to the bride’s charming of Harker, but the way he does so, calls into question his feelings toward Harker, he says “How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? [...] This man belongs to me! Beware how you meddle with him, or you’ll have to deal with me” (46). Dracula’s want for Harker comes from a place of hunger and power, but there is a semblance of desire there as well in the way he speaks about him to the brides. He is very protective of Harker, and his motivation is entirely selfish, but therein lies an almost queer desire, the description of the women lapping and licking Harker is very sexual and Harker feels attracted to them, so for the Count to lay claim on Harker, it is hard not to see attraction from Dracula as well. The difference from *Carmilla* is that Dracula is not able to have that same connection with Harker that Carmilla gets with Laura. So while Stoker presents these feelings, there is a lack of follow through whereas Le Fanu allows a connection to flourish and leave it open.

This hint of queer attraction is present in the dynamic between Dracula and Harker, but there is also something to be said about the friendship between Mina and Lucy. This relationship between the two women feels very similar to the relationship between Laura and Carmilla. One difference is that Mina and Lucy have a history and have been friends for years, whereas Laura desires a close female connection, one she finally finds in Carmilla. The connection between Mina and Lucy holds a lot of love and, seemingly, desire. Mina is constantly writing about Lucy's beauty, even going as far to say that she understands how Arthur fell in love with her, as if she herself is in love with Lucy, "Lucy is asleep and breathing softy. She has more colour in her cheeks than usual, and looks, oh, so sweet. If Mr. Holmwood fell in love with her seeing her only in the drawing-room, I wonder what he would say if he saw her now" (101-102). Mina's contribution to Lucy's safety during her bouts of sleepwalking also point to a very intimate relationship. The two women spend night and day together, and Mina is constantly worrying about Lucy where she feels a sense of responsibility for Lucy. Mina is the one to find Lucy in such a vulnerable state when she sleepwalks off into the garden and is being ravaged by the creature. Mina carries Lucy and puts her back to bed, all the while noticing every bit of discomfort and pain Lucy experiences from the wounds on her neck to the chills that pass through her. Mina also describes Lucy in much the same way that Laura describes Carmilla, of course this comes with the shared quality of them both being vampires, but it also feels like that same intimacy, the noticing of the other woman and her body language. Mina uses the word languid when describing Lucy after the attack and that is a word Laura constantly uses to describe Carmilla. It is more of a concern when applied to Lucy because she seems sick and has many ailments, but for Carmilla it describes her long life and little desire to exert much energy, or even how unnecessary it is for her to exert much energy at all. But again, Stoker lacks a lot of

follow through with his depictions, his writing seems to display the panic from this time and does not allow for these characters to break the confines and expectations placed on them.

Another way *Dracula* condemns female vampires is through their feeding on children. It is first seen with Dracula's brides when the Count has brought them a child to feast on. After the scene displays their villainous sexuality, it is a striking detail that they drink from a child. Dracula brings them a bag and one of them asks, "Are we to have nothing tonight?" (47), before Dracula gives them permission to feed from whatever is in the bag. Harker is not even able to witness the child, but he focuses on details that make him realize exactly what the brides are feeding on, "If my ears did not deceive me there was a gasp and a low wail, as of a half-smothered child" (47). These monstrous women with their ghastly sexuality kill a child because that is what villainous women do. It is a woman's greatest crime to harm a child because it goes against everything a woman is meant to be. This comes back later when Lucy's main victims are children as well. In the *Westminster Gazette* it is reported, "During the past two or three days several cases have occurred of young children straying from home or neglecting to return from their playing [...] some of the children, indeed all who have been missed at night, have been slightly torn or wounded in the throat" (198-199). It becomes more explicit and outright monstrous when the men are in the tomb preparing to kill Lucy the vampire. They see her actively feed from a child, "a dark-haired woman" (235), who is later confirmed to be Lucy, "was bent down over what we saw to be a fair-haired child" (235), and after this it is said, "we could see that the lips were crimson with fresh blood" (235). Lucy drank from the child, and this is the beginning of the switch for the men, Lucy's switch from being the sweet and lovely blonde wife of Arthur, to the dark-haired villain who has lost the right of ambivalence. This action is the quickest way to make a woman most horrifying; where she goes against her own purity to harm a

child. It is an interesting difference between Carmilla's victims being women, Dracula's victims being adults, but the female vampires in *Dracula* are only actively seen drinking from children, as though they must be punished for their vampirism and the greatest punishment is to turn them into a monster who harms the young. Dracula is obviously a monster and a villain in the way he is depicted in the novel, but he chooses Lucy and Harker as victims, not much of a punishment as it is for the women, and Carmilla is allowed to go for victims she desires, all women, as does Dracula. It is as if the women in *Dracula* all only desire children and motherhood, and now since they cannot have that as a result of their vampirism, they become the biggest evil they could be, a woman who hurts the children they cannot have.

Leading to Lucy's death and fall to vampirism, this explicit evil within her is important to how the men view her vampirism. Dr. Seward's reaction to having to kill Un-Dead Lucy, and how he perceives her, brings into light how men perceive women they are attracted to, "It made me shudder to think of so mutilating the body of the woman whom I had loved" (225). His main concern with mutilating Lucy's body as Van Helsing said, to cut off her head, fill her mouth with garlic and stake her, is because of the love he had for her, not because of a general respect for her dead body, but because of how he once felt about her. But this all means nothing because of how quickly she becomes an "it," "I was, in fact, beginning to shudder at the presence of this being, this Un-Dead, as Van Helsing called **it**, and to loathe **it**" (225). The woman he once loved now becomes dehumanized in his eyes. One of the most striking things about Steward's feelings towards Un-Dead Lucy is his lack of ambivalence once he sees her vampire form in motion, "Lucy's eyes unclean and full of hell-fire, instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew. At that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing; had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight" (236). He says something like this again when he sees her body

later, “But there was no love in my own heart, nothing but loathing for the foul thing which had taken Lucy’s shape without her soul” (238). His sentimental feelings towards Lucy and care for her as a person are all washed away at the sight of her as a vampire and replaced with burning hate. He would be delighted savagely to end her in that moment, and if Lucy’s vampirism, or a female vampire, represents the freedom of female sexuality then Steward’s reaction is representative a man’s strong hatred for a sexually liberated woman, and her evil actions of killing children is all important to those feelings because she becomes solely a monster. Though Steward’s feelings for Lucy are not ambivalent, Lucy’s existence and actions are. Steward describes her voice as “diabolically sweet” (236), because as a vampire, Lucy’s presence is meant to pull in and attract her victims but as a monster she still gives off a warning sign of danger. Lucy is meant to give off ambivalent persuasion, but she is not given the privilege of ambivalence because she is wholly evil, entirely unhuman and unlike her former self, “the whole carnal and unspiritual appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy’s sweet purity” (238). Vampires in this setting are not allowed to exhibit both human and vampire qualities, they are either one or the other, either good or bad, either mortal or immortal. It is quite interesting that this is not the approach people take with the vampire genre today. There are many reasons for this, since people have grown more interested in a complex villain, thus creating monsters like vampires who still exhibit their humanity. But at this point, the vampires served as a warning sign and a lesson, making them exhibit only monstrous qualities. Stoker portrays Seward’s actions as heroic. The way he acts towards Lucy and the switch in the way he views her is courageous because it takes a lot of effort to look at someone he once loved and be able to now act violently toward her. But as a modern reader it is a concerning switch for Stoker to write. Both switches, of Lucy from sweet human to evil vampire, and Seward from a man who loves

Lucy to a man who sees her as nothing more than a creature to be destroyed. It could be a result of Stoker's possible repression of her own sexuality. Female sexuality is portrayed as something to be feared, and it is not surprising for a time where women were expected to behave a certain way, but especially with this view of Lucy from Seward's point of view, it could be said that Stoker is using Lucy's vampirism as a way of explaining his negative, and potentially violent, feelings toward women.

A Dowry of Blood by S.T. Gibson explores the idea of vampirism in a different nature than other stories preceding hers. The main character, Constanta, who becomes a vampire, is stuck in a cycle of abuse in her relationship with Dracula, or you, as he is addressed in the novel. Dracula turns Constanta when she is on the brink of death, saving her life by giving her immortality. She becomes his wife, attached to him through her transformation as she learns and assimilates to her newfound vampirism. She becomes his plaything, something he can mold however he likes, "You filled me with your loving guidance, stitched up my seams with thread in your favorite color, taught me how to walk and talk and smile in whatever way pleased you best. I was so happy to be your marionette, at first. So happy to be chosen" (Gibson 5). Constanta recounts how he acted as her teacher and mentor, but those actions came alongside being her husband, creating an imbalance of power, yet she was eager to please him and fit the mold he crafted. Ambivalence expresses itself in the forms of desire and fear that come along with loving someone who hurts you, and Constanta learns of this ambivalence as time goes on with Dracula. Looking back on her life with Dracula, she chooses to show him how he truly was, to represent him as a man of love and abuse, "I will render you as you really were, neither cast in pristine stained glass nor unholy fire. I will make you into nothing more than a man, tender and brutal in equal measure, and perhaps in doing so I will justify myself to you" (10). She chooses not to

paint him as either good or bad, as either a loving husband or an abusive partner, but instead as the man he was, neither wholly one nor the other. His actions display the ambivalence that comes from an abusive and manipulative relationship. Constanta chooses to portray him as almost human, with the dignity of ambivalence. Dracula in this story represents desire and repulsion, where Constanta feels for him and understands him deeply but is also hurt by him deeply, keeping her love strong and present even as he continues to manipulate her and hurt her emotionally. She is constantly being put down and belittled by him, but he always somehow shows her the kindness and intimate affection she needs to stay in the relationship. Later in the novel, Constanta is able to see the ways in which Dracula manipulated her and the other spouses, and how even when she did not understand him, she tried her hardest to explain his actions, “All those years of living under your thumb and I still justified your behavior to the others, hoping to make sense of the madness” (199). He has trained her into allowing him to do as he pleases, through years and decades and centuries of manipulation and control. His actions represent the ambivalence of a vampire, he showers her in his love and makes her feel like he is the only one who can provide for her and love her truly and deeply in the way he does. But then he will do things that scare her and hurt her. He calls her his wife when introducing her to new people, even with Magdalena and Alexi apart of their marriage, she stays with that title. So, by choosing her to represent that part of their relationship despite the others, he is choosing her as his true wife, the only one he wants to be connected to in that way. He gives her a sense of importance above the others and treats her specially, even while he is acting in a way that hurts her, so she just takes it because deep down he has taught her that he truly loves her despite the pain, “‘I love you,’ you said into my mouth. It sounded like you were drawing up a peace treaty to protect the boundary lines of contested ground. ‘I promise you that’” (178). The constant assurance that he loves her

and cares about her is what makes it so hard for Constanta to truly see the abuse she has endured throughout the years of their relationship.

The dichotomy of Dracula's treatment is why it is hard when Constanta, Magdalena and Alexi do decide to kill their husband because they realize they cannot go on any longer in the way they have, but it is all harder because of how much he showed them love despite hurting them, "It would be easier if he hated us [...] But he loves us all terribly. And if we go on letting him love, that love is going to kill us" (235). The ambivalence of their feelings for him and his feelings for them is what makes it all so difficult. Dracula's love that does preside in the marriage between the vampires makes their decision to kill him more painful and more conflicting. Though they realize if they were to continue as they have, it would lead to their demise. They would continue to not have lives outside of him and he will do anything to keep them tied to him. They fear him and love him. They hate him and desire him. He loves them and hurts them. If he were truly all bad there would be no questioning or ambivalence towards killing him, it would be an easy choice, the only option. Like killing Lucy, she was no longer human, she became only a monster with monstrous actions in the men's eyes and so the decision to kill her was an easy one. The men all made a switch and Lucy became inhuman and evil, not the woman they once cared for. But here, Dracula is nuanced and multifaceted, he has shown them love and care and tenderness, but is controlling, manipulative and deceitful. The man who they all once loved, is the exact same man they must kill. He has not become a different person; they have just come to realize the abuse of his actions. There is confusion and conflict in their feelings toward him, making their actions difficult. It is why they stayed with him for so long because they did enjoy their time with him despite feeling trapped. Eventually Constanta does realize the absence of genuine ambivalence or choice in her situation, "My throat was tight, either with fear or desire or

the strange foreboding that had been nipping at my heels since the moment I set eyes on Alexi [...] There was nowhere for me to go. There had never been anywhere for me to go.” (178). Everything in relation to her husband is a form of conflict. Everything feels wrong and right, and these positives that she has felt have always existed through desire and wanting and feeling loved, but they have always been there as a means of false confirmation and enforcing complacency because there was never actually any other option. Dracula uses this same sentiment but turns it around on his spouses, “None of you have left me any choice” (204) using a false idea of forced actions, when in reality he is the one who has been giving his spouses no choice in their situation because of how he gives them both love and pain, they never even consider the option of leaving him.

These examples of ambivalence, especially that of vampires lacking it and humans feeling it, shows an interesting difference in how the classics used vampires to portray certain ideas and how modern stories use them differently. Vampires are a cautionary tale, they are the monster and the villain, the horror of the story so they are used to warn or set an example about things like female sexuality, as S.T. Gibson notes in her reading of *Dracula* from an interview, “I think that *Dracula* is on one hand a cautionary tale about female sexuality and the “liberated woman” in a way, but it’s also has these really compelling female characters.” But with modern stories and modern audiences, the idea of a one-note vampire who has no nuance or complexities has been done for so long that we have become interested and invested in what life as a vampire would truly be like, and how it can become humanized. How could we as humans lose every bit of ourselves once turned into a vampire? We cannot fathom a world where we do not hold onto our humanity through this change, and the idea of eternal life becomes another question of horror for a human isolated, another question and fear of death. To be undead is to be ambivalent, and

the freedom to feel is inherently human. It is two contradicting states, to be both living and dead, it is both a horror and a fantasy. There is romance in the idea of eternal life, to be reborn, and it is seen in this quote from *A Dowry of Blood*, “I truly believe I saw the light wink out of Alexi’s eyes before it came back again with renewed brilliance [...] We were witnessing a rebirth” (181). It is a desire to be reborn, to be able to start fresh in a new life but start it as an adult with all your knowledge and to have eternity ahead of you. Gibson uses the words “renewed brilliance” which brings an entirely different view of turning from human to vampire, one that is beautiful and romantic, unlike the monstrosity of the change in the classics. Being the vampire became attractive, the villain became desirable and humanizing the villain became another exploration of humanity. The lack of ambivalence within the classic vampires lost its meaning and consumers of these stories wanted something new. Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* brings humanity into the conversation of vampires, “Lestat was laughing, telling me callously that I would feel so different once I was a vampire that I would laugh, too. He was wrong about that. I never laugh at death, no matter how often and regularly I am the cause of it” (Rice 16), and this is so important to the development and progression of vampiric stories, creating new avenues for vampires to be used and explored to tell different stories and emotions. This one line from *Interview* gives the reader an entirely different sense of the vampire than what has previously been shown, as if Louis is like the readers of vampire stories, being told by the classics, or by Lestat, that he would laugh at death and view it differently in his new body and new life, but that was wrong, and the classics were wrong, vampires may cause death but it is not to be taken lightly, there is weight in human life, and vampires, while destined to be harmful to humans, were also once human and thus, in the case of Louis, see the value in it and the pain of their own destruction. Van Helsing uses his lack of ambivalence to destroy Lucy, but Louis holds onto this inner conflict, the need

and desire for blood but value of human life, in order to maintain his humanity. It is this same ambivalence that saves Constanta and the other spouses from their life with Dracula. If it were not for their ambivalence, they would not have seen the other side to Dracula's love. His affection for his spouses made his death more difficult for them, but to see that he also caused harm is what led them to this decision in the end. Exploring the ambivalence and humanity of vampires is what leads to great new stories and interpretations of these creatures. The beauty of the vampire is that there is so much to explore from the decades of its existence in literature, and the decades of life the characters have lived.

The Gilded Elite

Prologue

Theodore Easton regularly watched Juliet. He knew the way she jumped and skipped. He knew the dimple on her cheek that only came out when she was particularly pleased. He knew the sound of her squeal whenever she got dirt on her dress, so shrill it pierced through him like a blade. He relished in the pain.

Theodore Easton regularly watched his sister. He watched her from afar to keep her in his life. He'd seen her grow up from a distance. Watched as her interests changed and their parents spoiled her. He wondered how much she remembered him. What their parents told her happened, if she knew the truth or if they simply told her he was dead. He watched her when she cradled a book on the steps of their home, though he couldn't call it home anymore. He watched her when their parents took her to dinner for her birthday with her new dress swaying with each step and a stack of novels waiting for her back home.

Theo could only watch his sister at night. When the sun was just barely set. When he could still get a hint of her before she had to be inside, away from the darkness. He stood under a tree, hidden in the shadows, feeling more and more like the monster he'd become. His chest ached. He watched her and the whole time he held himself back from calling out to her.

"Juliet!" He'd say, and she'd turn her head in his direction, her brows would knit and her mouth would open, confused by the sudden distraction. But then her eyes would recognize him, and her face would dissolve into relief and joy. Her eyes would sparkle, her dimple would

appear, and she'd run to him, launching herself into his arms where he'd lift her from the ground, squeezing her small body to his, and breathe in the scent of lilies ever present on her skin since she was a baby.

"Theo!" She'd squeal into his ear, almost rendering him deaf but he'd laugh into her neck and his tears would spill on her dress. His throat grew thick at the thought of their reunion, but he never stopped himself from the self-inflicted pain of hope.

"Juliet, come inside!" His mother's voice ripped him from the fantasy. He watched his sister as she scrambled from the steps of what was once his home. She creased the page of her book, closing it as she went in through the open front door. Theo watched his mother pull Juliet inside as the night grew darker and she shut the door.

His eyes lingered on the spot for a few moments. Remembering the last time he walked through it three years ago. He turned away from the house, but it was already too late, the memory replayed in his mind. His mother sitting in the living room waiting for him. Before she saw him, Theo detected the worry on her face, her tear-stained cheeks. But when her eyes fell on him, her expression morphed to disgust. She took in his red eyes and pointed fangs so quickly the change felt like a slap in the face. It stung just as much as when she did slap him. When she crossed the living room to the entrance where he collapsed after entering the house.

"Ma?" He pleaded before she cut him off with a hand to his cheek, his fang ripping open his bottom lip.

"Leave," she said firmly, her voice thick with repulsion. "How dare you come here like this."

He had no answer. He was stunned into silence; the sudden aggression left him paralyzed. It was true, he hadn't thought before coming home. But he heard his mother's heartbeat, smelled

the blood coursing through her veins and he realized how foolish he was to put his family in danger.

“Theo?” A small voice pulled his eyes away from his mother to the top of the stairs. Juliet stood in her nightgown; she was so small for a nine-year-old. Her ragged blanket was clutched between her trembling hands.

Theo’s mother frantically blocked his view of his sister, “Go back to bed, Juliet!”

“What’s wrong with Theo?” Juliet’s voice trembled and Theo’s chest collapsed. His mother stood in front of him, but he scrambled to his feet as he heard her tell Juliet to return to bed again. He smelled the heady fear on his sister, could practically taste it and it made him gag. He didn’t dare chance another look at Juliet. He stumbled to the front door, grasping for the brass doorknob. Hoping for an escape from this torment. He knew he had to leave. He knew he was not welcome any longer. The sound of his sister’s voice rang out behind him and the only thing he could do was cut it off by shutting the door.

1

The doors of St. Augustine University loomed before Theo. He was greeted by the university’s slogan as he passed under the arch that signified the campus grounds. He passed vampire students sitting in the grass, scribbling notes, writing essays, reading textbooks. He saw them reciting Shakespeare standing on top of tables, surrounded by other thespians.

Theo stared up at the tall wooden doors, remembering what his mother told him on his first day of university back when he was human. Before he dropped out. “This is the most important thing you can do for yourself.” The words rang in his head then like a warning bell and

they played back in his mind now. The doors burst open as he reached out his hand to open them and he took a step back in surprise while a vampire in neat clothing rushed past him. He shook his head at himself and how ridiculous he felt, then grabbed the door before it could close. He stepped into the building.

The inside of Westenra Hall felt entirely different from his last school, and yet so familiar. The students bustling from classroom to classroom, or to the campus greens outside, their chatter echoing down the halls and their footsteps clacking across the marble tiles. Theo's footsteps joined the other students' as he searched for his classroom. The paper with his schedule was gripped between his fingers, his hand trembling slightly. He felt as though everyone was watching him, sizing him up, figuring him out. But he pushed that thought out of his head. He felt like everyone could see his age above his head like a sign exposing him. But again, he told himself he was being ridiculous. Firstly, his age didn't matter at a university like this. Not here where the other students were vampires of all ages. His twenty-six years of life, with three of them being undead, meant nothing to these other students. Some could be freshly eighteen-year-old vampires, their mommies and daddies sending them off to college to gain some life experience, and others could be a hundred times over eighteen-year-olds, attending university for the third or fourth or tenth time, collecting degrees and skills because what else was there to do with their immortality? There was nothing for him to worry about, besides being a recently turned vampire with no connections in the vampire world outside of his one friend. His one friend who graduated from this very university just two years ago, who encouraged Theo to enroll because "Of course they'll accept you, you're a goddamn *vampire*. And you should really do something with your life."

Theo had cringed when Boyd said that. It sounded like all the things his parents had said to him just a few years ago. Urging him to please do *something* with his life, but that advice always paralyzed him rather than motivated. Boyd took it into his own hands though, asking his old professors and mentors if a student like Theo—no vampire connections and a drop out with no prior completion of school besides high school—could feasibly get in. One professor encouraged Boyd to inform his friend that St. Augustine was particularly open to unconventional students. Theo tried not to take offense. This professor wanted to meet Theo, so Boyd introduced them, leading to Theo now standing in front of his classroom, room 435, the same number on his schedule.

Introduction to Vampire Law
G. Edwards
Room 435

Theo was a few minutes early but when he opened the door, the classroom was full. Every eye turned to look at him as he paused, trying to recalibrate his brain against the onslaught of attention.

“Mr. Easton!” Professor Edwards cheerily said from the front of the class, a smile plastered on his face. “I’m so glad to see you join us today,” his accented voice rung across the classroom.

“Happy to be here,” Theo said, finding his voice.

“Well, if you’ll take a seat—I believe there’s one open towards the back next to Mr. Bing—then we can get started.”

Theo nodded, then swallowed the lump in his throat. The door clicked in place as he put it back in the frame and then walked towards the open seat in the back. He tried to smile at his neighbor, but the other vampire looked down at his desk as soon as their eyes made contact.

It would be a long first day.

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Professor Edwards dismissed the class with a long list of reading and Theo already felt like his brain was scrambled. He gathered his papers into the briefcase Boyd let him borrow and everyone in the class shuffled out with ease while Theo struggled to get his belongings together.

“Mr. Easton, I’d like to chat with you before you head off,” Professor Edwards spoke from the front of the room, catching Theo off guard. He thought everyone had left.

“Of course, Professor,” Theo stood from his desk, almost toppling it over.

“As you know,” the professor began, stepping out from behind his podium. “I’ve taken quite a chance on you by vouching for your academic ability to admissions. I know Mr. Boyd knows you well and I trust his word, truly I do, but—”

The classroom door flew open. A disheveled young-looking vampire burst through, his clothes fancy and crisp, but his tie loose around his neck, and his hair undone by the wind.

“Mr. Archeron, what a surprise,” Professor Edwards attention was captured by this sudden arrival.

“Professor, I was hoping to speak with you,” the man’s eyes landed on Theo, “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Edwards looked between Theo and the man at the door, hesitating. “Mr. Easton, I’m sure you understand where I was going in our conversation. I look forward to having you in my class this year. I’m very excited to see what you’ll do.”

Theo was almost stunned into silence. His mouth hung dumbly open as he stared at the professor. Then he caught himself, “Yes. Of course, Professor. I’m eager to learn from you, and to prove my place in this university.” Theo mentally slapped himself for that last comment. The

professor was allowing him some grace by not explicitly finishing what he planned to say, and now he showed his low status in front of this vampire, Archeron, whose name sounded familiar to Theo. This obviously wealthy vampire. Most likely powerful from the way Professor Edwards did not turn him down. Theo's words caught Archeron's attention.

“Professor Edwards, I don't believe I've met this Mr. Easton. Will you introduce us?”

Archeron did not turn to the professor as he spoke, he only had eyes for Theo.

“Of course!” The professor's chipper voice returned, eager to please this vampire, “This is Theodore Easton, he is a new student of mine, a friend of William Boyd. You are familiar with Mr. Boyd, are you not?”

“I've heard of him, yes,” Archeron tapped his chin.

The professor continued, turning his attention to Theo, “And Mr. Easton, allow me to introduce you to Maxwell Archeron, son of Lord Silvester Archeron.”

Maxwell Archeron extended his hand for Theo to shake. Theo placed his hand tentatively in the Maxwell's.

“Excuse me, but I am not familiar with your surname. I haven't heard of any Eastons, should I have?” Archeron's grip was firm, his shake strong, almost threatening.

“Um, no. No, I don't see any reason why you would have, Mr. Archeron. I'm the first of my name,” Theo had learned to explain himself like this, as the first vampire of his name since his other living, human family did not matter in the world of the undead. He had no more connection to them anyway.

“Please, call me Maxwell. As long as it's alright for me to call you Theodore,” the vampire finally released his grip on Theo's hand.

“Of course,” Theo said. He adjusted Boyd’s briefcase on his shoulder. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Maxwell, but I ought to be on my way.”

“Pleasure to meet you as well, Theodore. I hope to see you again in the future,” Maxwell had not taken his eyes off Theo once. Theo nodded at his remark.

“Goodbye, Professor,” Theo addressed Edwards. “I look forward to our next class.” The professor bid Theo farewell and he left the two vampires to their conversation, shutting the door behind him, wondering why the son of one of the most powerful vampires had taken such interest in him.

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As Theo exited his second class of the day, Vampiric History, eyeing the long list of texts he needed to check out from the library to complete his upcoming assignment, someone clapped their hand against his back.

“Excuse me, clever student, tell me how you achieved such success in this university,” Theo recognized the voice immediately, and then shrugged the hand off him.

“I’m not in the mood, Boyd,” Theo said.

“What’s got your knickers in a twist?” Boyd bumped his shoulder against Theo’s as they walked onto the campus grounds.

“I’m serious, William,” Theo stopped his gait and turned to face Boyd. “I’m in way over my head, I knew this was a mistake when you suggested it. I *knew* it, and you’ll just have to tell Edwards I died some tragic vampiric death, some hunters cut off my head, staked my heart and burned what was left of me. Better yet, tell him you did it yourself, tell him I betrayed you and you had no choice, then you could be seen as some hero, and I’ll run off, maybe escape to Europe where I can be a disappointment to someone else.”

Boyd raised his eyebrows, assessing Theo. “Are you done?”

Theo scoffed and rolled his eyes, turning away from Boyd once again, stomping past him. He heard Boyd chuckle behind him.

“Will you relax?” Boyd said, catching up to him, keeping up with his stride. “I just wanted to be here for you on your first day. I know how serious it is to you.”

Theo kept on, his steps long and hurried. He didn’t feel like giving in that easily.

“Come on, Theo, since when have I been one to *not* push your buttons? You should expect it,” Boyd said, poking him in the side.

Theo eyed Boyd, who was to the right of him, without moving his head.

“You have got to lighten up, Theo. The moment you realize none of this is worth all that pressure is the moment you realize you’re capable of this.”

Boyd tried to catch Theo’s eye, but Theo stayed facing forward. Now embarrassed, the fight going out of him. “But what if I’m not?”

Boyd sighed, “Then you’ll figure something else out, but you won’t know if you’re capable or not if you don’t just do it.”

Theo looked across the courtyard, none of the other students paid him any attention. He was grateful for his invisibility. No one ever seemed to notice him because no one recognized him, their eyes simply skated over him as if he were nothing. Most vampires wouldn’t deign to acknowledge a lowly vampire like Theo, they could only ever be bothered to please those with status and connections. Those who could help them in some way or another. A university like St. Augustine was exactly the place for that, but Theo couldn’t imagine kissing up to the same people he disdained. There was such a stigma around vampires like Theo, the lowest vampires of the low. But he truly saw no other option for himself now. He couldn’t possibly work alongside

humans; they would never accept him, and he couldn't hide what he was. The vampires survived and worked in the nighttime; he could only bear the daylight for so long. He was grateful for the little bit he could since his youth permitted him some leeway. But that wouldn't last forever, and he could already feel his sensitivity growing with each day he dared to step out before sunset, to catch a glimpse of Juliet. He knew it was unhealthy for him to watch her, he knew it did nothing good for his head. But she was his anchor, the one thing keeping him tied to his humanity. He worried that if he let her go, if he untethered himself from her, he would be swallowed up by the darkest depths of vampirism, caught in the current of the undead. And he would forget what it meant to be human. So, he could not let her go. He would not.

“Fine,” Theo said. “You’re right.” He couldn't give up that easily. It had been his only strategy up until now and he couldn't let himself continue like that. Boyd relaxed in front of him, but Theo's eyes did not return to his friend. Instead, they caught on someone across the courtyard. Maxwell. He was talking to a group of vampires, they were all huddled around him, hanging onto his every word. They were all men, and they all looked so goddamn eager to get in Maxwell's good graces. It was almost pathetic, and Theo couldn't imagine being so desperate for approval from a bloodsucker. Yet he knew he'd have to earn their acceptance. At least at school. In some form or another, he had to be liked and excel, surpassing their expectations to earn his place in this institution because he had nothing to fall back on.

Maxwell spoke animatedly, talking with his hands and exaggerating his expressions. As he gestured widely, he spotted Theo, and something darkened behind his eyes before he covered it up with a look of gleeful recognition. Theo raised his hand in greeting, but Maxwell was already continuing his story and looking away.

“Who the hell are you waving to?” Boyd turned quickly, but Theo grabbed his shoulder and turned Boyd back toward him. Theo didn’t know what to make of this new friend, if he could call him that, but it seemed he had someone at school who noticed him. He couldn’t be sure yet if that was a good or bad thing.

Boyd’s chatter continued, in one of Theo’s ears and out the other. The way back to their apartment was tiresome but Theo appreciated the break from reality. He would let Boyd babble, the words spilling out of him about the most recent job he was sent on, and Theo would silently listen. That’s how the two of them worked, Theo retreating into himself while his friend expelled his every thought. That’s why Theo stuck with him; Boyd was reliable in being himself. He worked, he talked, he schemed, and he lied. But he only ever lied to gain something, and he couldn’t gain anything from Theo.

Boyd was also the vampire that found him on that night. The night he turned. After he left his mother and sister in what was no longer his home, Boyd took him in.

It had been raining that night and his hunger was insatiable, growing stronger with each passing second. Every sense of his was turned up, his vision at night was unbelievably clear, the moonlight casting as much visibility as the sun, each drop of rain that hit his skin felt like shards of glass, and the sound of rain falling mimicked rocks thrown against pavement when it was merely a drizzle.

And the smell. God, the smell was unbearable yet unavoidable. It was devastatingly alluring. It made his throat ache and gag at the same time; it made his stomach rumble and turn. It made his eyes water. It made him salivate. He tried to forget the scent of his family’s blood in his nose, but it lingered like a fresh cherry pie. And the scent of other humans was thick in the air, mingling together into a medley of temptation.

That was how Boyd found him. Weak in a puddle, several blocks from his family home. His eyes raw from tears and his pupils red from hunger.

Theo shook off the memory. It always overtook him at the first thought of that night. His memory was so vivid and strong, he always felt propelled back into the moment. He hated how well he remembered it all. The shame and the hunger.

Theo tuned back into his conversation with Boyd, and thankfully the other man hadn't paused to breath yet, and Theo let his friend guide him back home.

2

The melodic thump of the bed's wheels rang in Vera's ears. She and Frankie pushed their patient through the halls of Bellevue. The hospital was all white; cold and sterile. And the man in the bed howled and writhed. Vera grew anxious that he would topple out of the thin metal framed bed, but patients often wriggled just enough where they wouldn't fall out. Careful to cause enough disruption to the young volunteer nurses like Vera and Frankie.

Vera tightened her grip on the metal headboard.

"We're almost there, sir," Frankie said, a hint of frustration in her voice.

Vera shot her a look to shut her up. They weren't allowed to speak to their patients, they were meant to be invisible. Their silent transporters as if they miraculously were moved from one location to the other.

This patient was a man with bite wounds on his calf. He came in at the start of the night with two suspicious holes, screaming unintelligibly. Vera had seen a few patients like him before with two even punctures pierced through their skin. Vampire bite. The doctors never believed

them, wanting to chalk it up to some other ailment, but Vera always felt something under her skin, a tingling of fear and apprehension. These accounts always gave her pause. Freezing her in place as she listened to their stories of creatures popping out of manholes to sink their teeth into flesh, or shadows sneaking into their homes at night, creeping out from behind their closet doors.

These bites always led to sickness. A feverish infection where the affected would have dark veins and skin so devoid of color and clammy, they felt like marble sweating in the summer. Their illness would peak over the next forty-eight hours until finally their fever broke, and they'd be back to normal. The doctors would remove portions of blood from the patients, and it would come out hot and dark, but once their temperature went down their blood would look like regular human blood. Same as the sample of extracted blood, outside the body it would return to normal.

The man howled again in pain and shook the frame of the stretcher. The two young women continued their task. Breezing through the halls of the hospital, passing open doors of packed rooms with multiple beds. Many patients were asleep, thankfully, a perk of working the night shift. But the few who weren't asleep liked to make noise. They liked to complain and cause trouble for the lowly workers. The night shifts were left for the novices like Vera and Frankie. No one wanted to work at night, it was hard to adjust and then readjust on days off, and people didn't like the idea of living like a vampire. Working on their hours. It felt wrong, evil to exist as they did in the night. So, no one who had the option to work during the day would ever choose the night shift, and Vera didn't have that option.

Finally, they halted the stretcher just before the room of the patient's destination. Inside was a doctor Vera didn't recognize. He was young, handsome. His features were sharp and pointed, like shards of glass. Something about him felt like looking into a cracked mirror and Vera was superstitious. She looked away. Frankie spoke.

“Doctor Mortimer, here is your patient,” she started. She stood with her hands held behind her, her posture upright and her chin lifted. “He is exhibiting symptoms of a vampire’s bite and he’s been ordered a phlebotomy.” She handed him the paper signing off on his treatment. Frankie usually did the talking when it came to the doctors. Vera and Frankie did most of their tasks together, they volunteered at the same time, they both were already friends, best friends, and the nurses were usually paired while they settled into the job.

“Thank you, ladies,” his voice reminded Vera of molasses. Darkly sweet and slow. She thought of the ham her parents would make coated in the brown syrup. The doctor’s eyes passed over Vera to the man on the bed in front of her. He stepped to the bed and placed his hand gingerly on ill man’s head.

“You’re dismissed,” he looked up at the girls and Vera’s eyes locked with his. She broke contact first, nodding at Doctor Mortimer and turning quickly away. She walked through the doorway and heard Frankie say goodbye, she could hear a smile in her voice.

Frankie joined her side and Vera tried shaking off her unease.

“Did you notice anything weird about him?” Vera asked.

“The only thing I noticed was how absolutely breathtaking that man was,” Frankie declared, and Vera couldn’t help but laugh.

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Vera and Frankie changed out of their nurses’ outfits in silence. It was always like this for them at the end of their workday. Their minds were scrambled, and their bodies fatigued. The two friends had grown accustomed to comfortable silence, and they both knew how tired the other was. They felt it in their slow movements as they peeled off the heavy nurse dress, the white apron overskirt, their nurse hat that gave them a headache from the pins keeping it in

place. Vera pulled on her day clothes, another set of heavy skirts and a long sleeve blouse, and pictured the soft embrace of her bed, the lightness of her nightgown.

Their trip home was quiet for the most part. The streets of New York awakening with the presence of daylight. Carriages thumping across the cobbled streets. Trains rumbling beneath them. They walked until they got a second wind, waking them enough to chat about their 12-hour shift. When Frankie was tired, she always laughed louder than she should, lacking the filter to tone it down. People would turn their heads and Vera would smile and hide her face behind her hands. Frankie brought lightness after work, she gave Vera energy, and she could carry them through their hour-long commute back home. They didn't live far from each other, just three blocks away.

Vera and Frankie were laughing about a slip up Frankie made toward the end of the night, a mix-up of her words where instead of saying one thing, she said another, less lady-like thing. They arrived at Frankie's building catching their breath and then hugged to part ways.

"See you tonight," Frankie said and blew a kiss that Vera caught before stuffing it in her bodice. She walked away down the block to her building. Her smile still lingering on her face.

Vera watched the people passing her by, rushing to their jobs and to school. Their steps fast and hurried. She loved the quickness of the city. She loved the way she never saw the same persons face twice. They all blurred into each other, and Vera was always too tired, so tired her mind would play tricks on her. Their hats would obstruct their faces, they'd turn their heads too quick to their neighbor, Vera would look away as soon as their eyes looked to her.

It was bad when she passed someone she knew on the street because they'd always call her name and she'd be surprised they were even there. They'd ask if she even noticed them and she'd have to say no and lie that she was too distracted by something else, when really, she

didn't pay close enough attention so she wouldn't see her sister's features in the passing faces. She was scared if she looked at a young woman that her face would morph into Sofia's soft features, her round cheeks, and big eyes. Vera pushed the thought out of her head. She avoided people so she wouldn't see her sister, and now there she was picturing her face in her mind.

Vera was so locked into her walk home, going through the motions of each step without a thought that she barely registered when a hand gripped her lower arm.

"Hi, darling," said a familiar deep voice close to her ear.

Antonio stood handsomely behind her. His dark wavy locks fell perfectly over his ears. His hair was just a touch too long, the way Vera liked it. She leaned into him and shut her eyes for a moment. Breathing him in, emptying her mind. Sofia swirled in her mind and the thoughts that always plagued Vera when she thought of her, like dirt mixing in a puddle.

"How was the hospital?" He said, whispering, and she lifted her head from his chest then turned to face him.

"It was..." she started then trailed off seeing the smile on his face. His lips were pressed together in a tight smile, keeping in whatever was the cause. "What?" Vera asked.

He couldn't contain it, the words broke free from his feeble attempt to keep them in, forgetting about what he asked her before, "I have something exciting to tell you." He put out his arm for Vera to hold, and she reached out her hand. She anchored herself to him. Her eyes locked on the side of his head, admiring the curve of his jaw that flowed so seamlessly to his neck. He kept his gaze straight ahead as they began walking again.

"I know you haven't met my parents yet, but we have an event coming up and they said I could invite someone, but when they said 'someone' I knew they meant you because—well because they love the sound of you already and I just know that they'll adore you." Antonio's

parents were wealthy. They inhabited a social class Vera never dreamed she would encounter until she met Antonio. Vera's parents didn't like Antonio's family. Of course, they were wealthy but in a way humans couldn't be without having direct ties to vampires. But Vera had never seen anything weird with Antonio's parents. Though, she didn't know them yet. She and Antonio spent most of their time with just each other, Frankie was the only one who really knew about them. Besides Vera's sister.

“Really?” she asked. “What is this event exactly?”

“Well, I can't go into specifics just yet. For now, I'll say there will be a lot of powerful and important people there and my parents have been making amazing progress in their work. I think this will be a big turning point for them. And,” he said. “I'd love for you to be there. *They'd* love for you to be there.” He laid his soft hand over the hand Vera held his arm.

A blush spread across Vera's cheeks, and she almost forgot the troubles that afflicted her. Antonio somehow made her heart race and her face flush, while also soothing her into a sense of peace she didn't feel with anyone else. This was amplified by the fact that she hated being home. It served as a reminder of everything that happened, and all the animosity toward her.

“Of course, I'll go, Antonio,” she peered up at him, and he finally turned to look back at her too. A smile spread across his face, a crinkle in his cheeks that made his face even more handsome. She was always struck by that smile; it amazed her the beauty he exuded.

—

Entering her home caused an instant shift in her mood.

The despair permeated throughout the Arce's small apartment. Each creak of the floorboards, whine of the door hinge, and layering of dust pulled Vera down into the depths of grief she worked so hard to avoid every day.

But she stepped her way into the kitchen. Her parents sat the small round table with a cup of coffee in front of each of them. She took a moment before announcing her presence.

It was hard to decide what was worse. Her mother's coldness, her blank expressions and empty gestures, or her father's neglect. He barely looked at her now, and when he did it was as if she didn't register in his mind, and he looked right through her. It wasn't because when he looked at Vera he only saw her sister because Vera and Sofia didn't look alike. Vera figured he simply couldn't stand to look at her anymore. It had nothing to do with Sofia, and everything to do with her. Maybe he couldn't grapple with the fact that he despised the daughter they were left with.

Her mother, on the other hand, still acknowledged Vera existed, but no matter how hard she tried to hide it, it was clear she too was unhappy about it. Vera saw it in the way she grimaced whenever Vera spoke, in the way she avoided eye contact, in the way she left food for Vera, like her plate of food on the table now, but always without acknowledging her actions like she only did it because she felt obligated to.

To put it simply, they blamed Vera. And she couldn't blame them for it. She was at fault. If she had only been where she was supposed to be. If she had just kept her word and met her sister that night, then Sofia would be here now. The two had planned to meet outside Central Park right before nightfall, so they could walk home together. But that night Vera failed to make it there, caught up in things she wished she hadn't been. She forgot all about their plan, and Sofia was left waiting. Alone. All they know is that a little boy near the park saw Sofia waiting in the spot they agreed upon when a man approached her. He spoke to her intently, saying something that made her follow. The boy stayed hidden, afraid of what the man was since he could tell from how the man held himself, and how his cheeks were sunken and his skin was unnaturally smooth

and porcelain, that he was a vampire. The little boy protected himself. And Sofia stayed outside the park for longer than she should have, at least that's what Vera gathered from the boy's recount, since it was well after nightfall that he said he saw her. Vera could only assume Sofia was concerned at that point, too concerned that Vera would arrive to an empty sidewalk and then walk home alone herself, so Sofia stayed and waited. And it led to this life, void of Sofia. Vera would play in her mind all the possible fates of her sister. But truthfully, she knew her sister was out there. She was just afraid of what she would find if she went looking. If, when she found her sister, she would still be Sofia.

“Good morning,” Vera spoke a little too loudly and her mother flinched.

The wooden chair creaked as Vera lowered herself into it. She began eating her food, fresh bread with mixed vegetable stew of potatoes, celery, and carrots with beef. Her exhaustion weighed on her as she ate, the warmth of the stew lulling her body into rest. She looked at her parents' blank faces. Their minds elsewhere. She wanted to pick their brains. She wanted to know exactly what they thought when they looked at her. How much anger they felt, how much resentment. She wanted to feel it all, so she could understand them better. But she understood them enough because when she looked in the mirror, she imagined their feelings couldn't be any worse than the guilt eating away at her. When she looked at herself, she saw everything wrong with her that they saw plus more. When she looked in the mirror, she saw the betrayal and disappointment that Sofia must've felt on that night.

Vera sat there in silence. Her exhaustion slowly took over, and she allowed the awkwardness to settle in the air. After finishing her food, she returned to her room and stripped her clothes off. Her bed was not made, her sheets a mess on the mattress, but she underneath them and let sleep overtake her.

A door was open to a hospital room veiled in darkness. It was like a portal into a black hole, so empty and void of light. Vera stood outside of it in her nurse uniform, but her clothing was tattered and torn. Her hat was missing, and her hair was a tangled mess. She held a syringe with a needle in her hand, though she didn't know how to administer a shot. The needle looked to be used because it was filled with a thick red liquid so Vera thought she might have to dispose of it. She looked down the hallway and it stretched infinitely. Then she took a step into the room.

The black enveloped her. She felt water on the floor beneath her feet. She really heard it more than felt it. It was as if something leaked, spilling over a thin layer of swishing water, displaced with each step. She made her way deeper into the room until her eyes adjusted to the dark.

A single hospital bed sat inside. The thin white metal frame was small with a mattress barely thicker than a plank of wood. And on it was a woman. As soon as Vera spotted her, the view of the room became brighter. The bed spotlighted as if from some invisible light.

Her face was thin, unhealthily so. Her cheeks sunken, her skin almost translucent. Her eyes were closed, but her eyelids fluttered so her lashes brushed the tops of her cheeks. She was so frail; Vera could see her heart beating in her chest. Her chest that rose and fell with each labored breath.

"Sofia," the name slipped out of Vera's lips in a whisper. Her heart ached. Vera felt something drip onto her hands and she realized she was crying. The tears fell hard and fast. She thought she might drown.

Sofia's lips parted slightly. A sound slipped out.

Vera leaned in, trying to hear her sister's voice again. She thought she could hear her clearer, so she moved closer and closer.

Black smoke emerged from between Sofia's lip along with a moan from deep within her chest.

"Sofia?" Vera tried again, reaching out a hand to touch her shoulder. As her hand got closer to Sofia's body, Vera noticed something else leaking out of her sister's mouth. A dark red liquid poured down Sofia's chin and before Vera could stop the motion of her hand, she made contact with her sister's boney shoulder.

Sofia's eyes shot open. Her pupils quickly met with Vera's and Vera saw they were all black. Sofia's mouth opened, revealing long and sharp fangs as she lunged toward Vera's arm.

Vera shot up in bed. Sweat dripped down her back like a cold glass on a hot day. She couldn't get this false image of her sister out of her head. It was inescapable, coming back to her every night without fail. Vera closed her eyes and steadied her breath. A knock at the door startled her eyes open again.

"Vera, food," her mother's voice was muffled by the door, but she still heard the ice in it. Her blanket was crumpled at the foot of her bed, she must've kicked it off herself as she slept. Fatigued, she lifted her body and felt the world weigh down on her. She averted her eyes from the other bed in the room. Its mattress sat naked with no sheets or blankets. A reminder that something was missing. The two twin beds sat parallel to each other, each a representation of their respective sister. One stripped of its identity, empty, missing, a mystery. The other unkempt. A lost thing without the other.

She left the room, shutting out the memory of Sofia once again. This was when she could pretend like her life was normal. It was her only tactic to face her parents. Her mother stood at the kitchen sink with a mug of coffee next to her. She would always bring up lunch for Vera from their restaurant. Her mother never sat with her though.

“Thank you, Mami,” Vera’s voice cut through the silence. Her mother flinched. Vera picked up her spoon, dipping it in the bowl of thick stew and ate despite her now lost appetite. Her mother still stood at the sink with her back to Vera. Then she dropped her mug into the sink, clanging as it landed. She moved toward the door and Vera kept her head pointed down at her food. She didn’t expect her mother to say anything and she waited for the sound of the door closing as she returned to the restaurant. But her mother said one parting sentence.

“Lock the door on your way out,” and the door slammed behind her.

3

“I have a job for you.”

Theo looked up, his attention pulled from the books and papers splayed out in front of him. The large wooden table in front of him belonged to the library, which was pretty much empty at this time. Besides the man now standing across from Theo.

Maxwell Archeron was dressed in a pressed dress shirt, pressed pants, every line of his clothing deliberate and sharp. Theo felt frumpy in his ill-fitting jacket borrowed from Boyd. His only real clothes were for work when he had to be presentable.

“Sorry, what?” was all Theo could think to respond. His focus was cut off, and the man in front of him along with his words didn’t make sense in Theo’s mind.

“My family is having a party. A big one. We throw them regularly, but this one is especially important for my father. So, I’m inviting you to work it.”

That was an oxymoron to Theo. Inviting and working were two different things. One, he would be regarded as equal to the other vampires in attendance. The other he’s relegated to be beneath them. He already waited on entitled vampires at work, but he worked at a shoddy little bar where his customers were of lesser income. He was meant to interact with them as a friend, there was some level of equality there. Working for the most powerful vampires, where they all would be gathered, he would be a servant, unworthy of a name or their attention. He’d have to be invisible, catching their every need and want without bothering them. It already grated on him to work for vampires, but he had no other choice and at least in his bar they were vampires like him.

So that’s why he said no to Maxwell. He could tell that wasn’t a word Maxwell was used to hearing, but Theo detected a layer of respect beneath his confusion.

Before he walked off, he said, “If you change your mind, you know where to find me,” and gestured to the institution around them.

Theo felt secure in his decision. He might have been missing out on some extra money, some *good* money at that, but he also held his dignity intact. He stuck to his morals and his disdain for vampires was important to him, he could never let himself falter on that, and the top of the top of vampires, he would never want to appease them.

“You idiot!” Boyd smacked him upside the head. It shocked him more than it hurt but Theo still cried out, “Ow!”

The two were in the Diamond Den, the bar where Theo worked. It was a dead night, a few vampires had straggled in soon after nightfall, looking for some place to waste their time. Boyd sat across the bar from Theo, but currently, he was leaned forward over the hardwood counter.

“You little—” Theo caught Boyd’s hand as he went to smack him again. He held Boyd’s wrist in his palm and Boyd tried to wriggle out. “How could you be so stupid? Do you not understand how big that would be for us?”

“Us?” Theo questioned. “I don’t recall Maxwell mentioning your name.”

Boyd waved him off, now having his arm free, “That’s beside the point. Picture this, you say yes to *the* Maxwell Archeron—who says no to an Archeron, anyway? I’m surprised you’re standing in front of me right now,” Theo rolled his eyes, “But, you say yes, and you offer up a friend to work as well.”

Theo just shook his head, wiping down the counter as Boyd sat back down in his stool. Some of his drink spilled over when he shot forward to hit Theo. “Boyd, don’t be ridiculous. You’d sooner get invited to the party than be asked to work it. I know nobody.”

“You know me.”

He did know Boyd. Somehow, he’d gotten lucky finding Boyd on that night. Or really Boyd had found him. Curled up on the ground, his clothes wet and dirty. He was a stray and Boyd took him in.

Theo had spent most of that first year in bed. He still wondered why Boyd took on that responsibility. Theo would sleep all day and stare at the wall all night. He tried to read but his eyes would glaze over, and he’d find himself staring at the same word for an hour. He’d toss and turn under his sheets, over his sheets, twist around on the bed so he’d be laying upside down. He

lost so much weight from barely feeding. His cheeks sunk in, his under eyes were black and blue, and still Boyd would knock on the door of his second bedroom and bring Theo a slice of toast or a pastry or even sometimes a hot soup, anything he could get his hands on and steal from the humans. Since Theo was so young he could still stomach food. Boyd would also bring with him a bottle of blood. Theo always wondered how Boyd got it, but he was also scared to find out. He rarely drank from it, though he'd end up feeling guilty that it was going to waste and chug old left over bottles. They would always make him sick but at least the human hadn't gone through that blood loss for nothing. But Theo's days all blurred together into one year of haze. His mind was like a misty night, full of shadows and fog. The prospect of an eternity ahead of him made that year move like a week.

Whenever Theo asked why Boyd stuck around, giving him a place to sulk and grapple with his transition, Boyd would just say, "You remind me of someone." Theo never pushed it. Boyd had already given him enough.

"That's not what I meant," Theo said and took in a breath. "These vampires don't even see me as one of them. I don't want to be treated that way. I can't willingly put myself into that situation."

Boyd sucked his teeth, "I understand that more than anyone, Theo." He swirled his finger around the rim of his glass, the ice had melted and watered down the last bits of his drink. "Working for them does not mean you've succumbed to their thoughts of you—could you pour me a fresh one of these?"

Theo grabbed the glass from in front of Boyd, the vampire could rarely complete a thought. He knew Boyd understood him, since he had been turned as well but over a hundred

years ago. Theo had little knowledge of what Boyd's life had been like over that century, but he had decided early in their friendship that he would be patient. After all, they had an eternity.

“Did you want to work in a bar?” The question surprised Theo, he hadn't expected his thought to go there.

“Well, I—no, I didn't,” he poured liquor into a new glass then plopped an ice cube inside. He tried to look in Boyd's eyes while he placed the glass in front of the vampire, but he was looking down at the bar.

“No, you didn't. And did you want to be serving vampires at all?” He didn't let Theo answer, “No, you didn't. But for right now, it is helping you survive. Do you want to be doing this forever? You want to be stuck pouring drinks and cleaning up after drunks forever?”

Theo shook his head. This wasn't what he wanted. He wasn't like the other vampires who worked in the bar with him. He wasn't like Francis or James. They were happy doing this work, they came in and brought with them the energy needed to keep the bar running and to keep customers coming back. They interacted so well with their customers, and Theo struggled to make conversation with any of them. He wanted something different for his life, and he wasn't sure he'd ever find it behind this bar.

“So, sometimes,” Boyd continued. “You must go out there and see how the others live. I'm not saying you have to become them; I wouldn't wish that on you, but there comes a point where you need to learn what is really going on out there. In those parties, you can learn more about those elite vampires, the ones who are running *everything*, than you can even at university. And it'll teach you how to live your own life.”

This was the push Theo needed. He had little understanding of what his new life meant for him, and he had let himself calcify into stagnation. This life of his was not what he envisioned, and Theo did not particularly like being confronted with the fact of his own life.

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