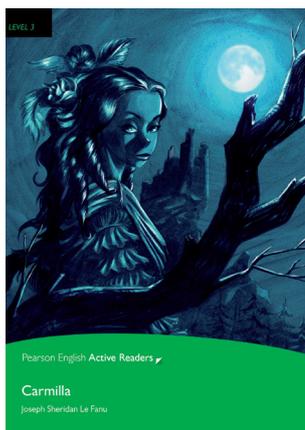


# Carmilla

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu



## About the author

Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu was born on the 28 August 1814, in Dublin, Ireland. He was privately educated and in 1833 went to Trinity College, Dublin, to study law. He graduated in 1839 but he never worked as a lawyer, choosing to pursue a career in journalism instead. He is widely regarded as the founder of the Victorian ghost novel and came to fame with his 1864 novel *Uncle Silas*. His novella, *Carmilla* (1872), published in a book of short stories entitled *In the Glass Darkly*, undoubtedly influenced Bram Stoker, who wrote *Dracula* a quarter of a century later. In 1844, he married Susanna Bennett with whom he had four children. After her death in 1858, he became a recluse and embarked on a period of intense writing. He said of his writing that it was the search for 'the equilibrium between the natural and the supernatural'. He died on 7 February 1873, and is buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin, Ireland.

## Summary

Countess Mircalla is a vampire who manifests herself in the form of two young girls, Carmilla and Millarca. These two forms prey on the innocent Laura, who survives the encounter because the vampire is killed before it can complete its work, and Bertha, who dies as a result of her contact with vampire.

**Chapter 1:** Eighteen-year-old Laura had a frightening experience when she was only six years old. One night, she woke up and saw a beautiful young woman getting into bed with her, and then felt two sharp needles going into her neck. She cried out and the woman disappeared when the servants entered the room. Twelve years later, Laura has another strange experience. One day, as she and her father are walking, he tells her that his friend, General Spielsdorf, will not be able to visit them as

planned because his niece, Bertha, had died. The General sent Laura's father a letter in which he proposed the theory that Bertha had been killed by a monster; and that he would hunt the monster till the end of his days. As they are returning home, they witness an accident involving a carriage. A lady emerges from the carriage and her injured daughter is lifted out of it. The woman leaves her daughter in Laura's father's care and continues her journey.

**Chapter 2:** Later, when Laura visits the young woman in her bedroom, she is shocked to discover that she resembles the woman she had seen in her bedroom twelve years ago. The woman then says she had seen Laura's face in a dream twelve years ago. Laura has mixed feelings towards her and she is uncomfortable about some of the things the woman says to her, especially when she talks of loving her. The woman's name is Carmilla, but that is virtually all she will say about herself. Carmilla also has some strange habits. She never gets up before one o'clock, she never eats anything, and only drinks cups of chocolate. Also, she seems physically tired all of the time. One day, the two women see a funeral in a forest and Laura tells Carmilla that a terrible sickness has arrived in the area and people are dying. Carmilla becomes angry and makes a strange animal sound, admitting that she hates funerals. The next time Laura sees Carmilla angry is when a traveller, who has sold the women a pair of lucky charms, comments on Carmilla's long, sharp tooth.

**Chapter 3:** When a picture cleaner returns some paintings to the castle, Laura notices that one of them, a portrait of Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, 1698, looks just like Carmilla. One evening the women are walking in the moonlight when Carmilla suddenly becomes very affectionate towards Laura, causing Laura to think she has caught the illness that has killed several people in the area. One night, Laura has a nightmare. She sees a huge cat in her room which jumps up on the bed, and she feels needle like sensations on her neck. When she wakes up she sees a woman in the room, who then disappears through a locked door. Carmilla tells Laura that she had had a similar nightmare. From then on Laura experiences nights of deep, dream-filled sleep, but wakes up tired. Her appearance deteriorates so much that her father believes she is ill. One night she sees Carmilla dressed in a blood soaked nightdress. She screams for help and the servants arrive. Laura wants to wake up Carmilla, but when they go to her door they find it locked. Some servants break the door down to reveal an empty room.

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**Chapter 4:** They search everywhere, but do not find her. Laura goes back to Carmilla's bedroom and is astonished to see Carmilla there. Laura's father believes that Carmilla had walked out of her room in her sleep. She had then returned to her room while everyone was searching the rest of the house. Later, a doctor arrives to examine Laura. He discovers two small circles on her neck and then has a serious conversation with Laura's father, stating that he thinks something is wrong. A picnic is planned in the old Karnstein Castle. Laura and her father set off in the first carriage and Carmilla and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine come sometime later. On the way, Laura and her father meet General Spielsdorf, who is a broken man and whose only interest is the death of Bertha, his niece, at the hands of what he believes is a monster. He plans to open one of the Karnstein graves and destroy the monster inside it.

**Chapter 5:** The General then tells Laura and her father a very strange story. Sometime in the past, he and Bertha met a mysterious woman and her daughter. Bertha made friends with the woman's daughter, Millarca. The mother is then called away on urgent business and asked the General if he could look after her daughter. Encouraged by Bertha, he reluctantly agreed. Once back in their castle, the General began to notice some strange things about Millarca. She was always tired, never came downstairs until the afternoon, and apparently could walk through locked doors. Bertha then became ill and started having bad dreams and feeling sharp pains in her neck. While she is listening to the General's story, Laura becomes increasingly alarmed because Millarca sounds exactly like Carmilla. The group arrive at Karnstein. The General announces he is going to find the grave of Mircalla, Countess of Karnstein, and cut off her head. He is convinced he has seen the Countess, even though she is reported to have died over one hundred years ago.

**Chapter 6:** The General carries on with his story. Bertha became seriously ill and a doctor's diagnosis was that she was being attacked by a vampire. One night, the General saw a black shape biting Bertha's neck and attacked it with an axe. The shape turned into Millarca who then disappeared. The next day Bertha died. At this point in the General's story Carmilla arrives. When he sees her, he goes berserk and attacks her, because he believes Carmilla is really Countess Mircalla. Carmilla escapes into thin air. A strange man arrives on the scene and directs the General and Laura's father to Mircalla's grave. The next day they open the grave and find the body of Mircalla,

alias Carmilla and Millarca, inside. They kill her and burn the body. The strange man, Herr Vordenburg, then reveals the truth about Mircalla. A relative of his had fallen in love with Mircalla, who had subsequently died as a result of being bitten by a vampire, and had come to life again. He pretended to the villagers that he had destroyed her grave. He later repented and gave Herr Vordenburg a map showing where the grave could be found. Laura never forgot Carmilla and often saw her in her dreams, sometimes as a beautiful woman and sometimes as a monster.

### Background and themes

**Gothic setting:** The story contains all the classic Gothic imagery: isolated castles, abandoned churches, woods, strange dream sequences that blend with reality, blood drinking vampires and shadowy gypsy-like characters.

**Unconventional attraction:** To present day readers, Carmilla's overt amorous attraction to Laura raises few eyebrows. However, in the nineteenth century this was a shocking subject to portray.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapter 1

**Before reading** (p. 3, after 'I woke and cried loudly.')

- Discuss:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Do you ever have bad dreams? What do you dream about? Have you had the same dream many times? Do you think dreams can tell us something? Do you usually tell somebody about a bad dream?*

#### After reading

- Write and guess:** On the board, write *Laura's father was German*. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (English not German). Now students choose a sentence from Chapter 1 and rewrite it changing one word. Students move around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

#### Chapter 2

##### Before reading

- Predict:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to predict what Carmilla will be like. Ask them to consider the following questions: *Has Laura seen her before? If she has, where and when? Does she drink wine/tea/chocolate? Does she eat meat/vegetables/nothing? Is she tall or short? Is she fat or thin? Is her skin healthy? Does she move lazily or quickly? Does she tell Laura about her life? Does she get up early or late?*

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**While reading** (p. 19, after 'Do not speak to me about ghosts.')

- 4 **Discuss:** Put students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Do you believe in ghosts? If so, what do they look like? Can ghosts talk to us? Are there any stories about famous ghosts in your country? Have you seen any films that have ghosts in them?*

(p. 17, after 'You are mine, you will be mine. You and I are one for ever,' she said, like an angry lover.)

- 5 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Carmilla and Laura. Carmilla wants Laura to be her lover and gives her reasons why it is a good idea but Laura violently objects. See Discussion activities key.

### After reading

- 6 **Write and ask:** Write *Who wore old and dirty clothes?* on the board and elicit the answer (The servants with the carriage.) Ask students to write another question about something in Chapter 2. Now have students stand up and walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other's questions.

### Chapter 3

**While reading** (p. 34, after 'Are you ill, my dear,' my father often asked me.)

- 7 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Laura and her father. In the conversation Laura tells her father about how she is feeling, about her dreams, and about Carmilla's strange behaviour towards her. Tell them to use the information in the chapter and to invent some details of their own. See Discussion activities key.

### After reading

- 8 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask one of them to study the pictures on pages 26–27 and 30–31 and the other the pictures on pages 32–33 and 35. Tell them to write five sentences about each picture, two of which are not true. The students read out their sentences and their partner has to identify the mistakes.

### Chapter 4

#### After reading

- 9 **Write:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to write a summary of Chapter 4. Tell them the summary must be exactly fifty words, not one more or less. The students then read out their summaries to each other.
- 10 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *nightdress, river, medicine, Matska, blue, guests, priest, suitcases*. Ask the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapter 4.

### Chapter 5

**While reading** (p. 51, after 'I believe there has never been a finer party – even in Paris.')

- 11 **Discuss:** Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Do you like parties? What was the best party you have been to? Why was it so good? What music do you like to dance to at parties? Have you ever had a big party in your house? Do you have special days for parties in your country?*

#### After reading

- 12 **Game:** Write the word *person* on the board. Then write the word *important* in front of it. Tell the students that there are approximately 40 words in Chapter 5 that can be written before the word 'person' to describe a person's feelings, character or physical appearance. In pairs tell them they have 10 minutes to find as many of these words as possible. The pair with the most words wins. See Discussion activities key for suggested words.

### Chapter 6

**While reading** (p. 69, after 'There has never been another vampire in Syria since that day.')

- 13 **Write:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are newspaper journalists and they are going to write a story about the killing of the vampire. Tell them to use the information in the book and invent some more information e.g. the vampire talks to the men before she dies. Tell them to make the story sensational, and to draw illustrations if they want. Each pair reads their story to the class and they vote on which story is the best.

#### After reading

- 14 **Write and guess:** Put the students in groups of four. Tell two of the students to read through Chapters 1–3 and the other two to read Chapters 4–6. Tell them to write down 20 questions about their chapters. Pair A then asks Pair B their questions and vice-versa. The pair with the most correct answers wins.
- 15 **Research:** Tell the students that the vampire myth has inspired many films. Put *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *The Twilight Series* and *From Dusk till Dawn* on the board and ask the students for further suggestions. Then put the students in groups of three and ask them to select a different film each and look for information on the Internet about their film. The group then discuss their films.