

Biting Back at Society: The Menace of the 1970s Lesbian Vampire

Sasza Hinton

ABSTRACT: The myth of the lesbian vampire spiked in popularity throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, inspiring erotic horror films like Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970). While the easing censorship regulations allowed the film to depict more overt scenes of sex and violence, it was the second wave of feminism that allowed the film to be as erotic as it was (Baker 556), as the traditional gender role of men was called into question. Protesting for bodily autonomy, the right to express their sexual identities and overall looking for equal opportunities to their male counterparts, the traditionally superior man was under threat by female bonding. Lesbian vampires like Mircalla were unchained to a male figure and were able to liberate other women through their mental strength, physical beauty, and by providing deeper emotional connections than men could. The lesbian vampire presented a reality where women could receive everything from a female partner, rendering the male useless.

KEYWORDS: Vampire, Lesbianism, Horror, Film Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Literature

The Vampire Lovers was one of the most erotic horror films of the 1970s. Based on the 1872 gothic novella *Carmilla*, the film focuses on Mircalla, who later goes by Carmilla, a female vampire who preys upon Eastern European townsfolk, though she favours young female victims. While Universal's 1936 film *Dracula's Daughter* was the first to introduce a filmic adaptation of the lesbian vampire, *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) was revolutionary for its overt display of sexuality. Studio heads for early vampire films were persistent in censoring any images of non-heterosexual relationships. This is why in *Dracula* (1931), the scene fades to black the moment the Count kneels next to Reinfield's body (*Dracula*, 00:17:49-00:18:08) and why in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), the camera pivots upwards away from Countess Zaleska's victim Lili, who screams as the attack takes place off-screen (*Dracula's Daughter*, 00:35:49-00:35:59). By contrast, film and media professor Dr. Rick Worland notes that *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) consistently borders the line of soft porn (96) through its displays of female nudity and same-sex intimacy. While the vampire films of the 1930s represented "cultural anxieties concerning queerness within society" (Tringali 1), *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) preyed upon the fundamental male fear of the destruction of "concepts of Western Judeo-Christian thought on which civil society [was] built" (Benshoff 117). In an age of sexual revolution, the film represented the threat of female bonding to traditional heteronormative society as Mircalla's influence allows her female followers to question male superiority.

A heterosexual model of gender disequilibrium is quickly cemented within the first 20 minutes of the film. As dancing couples cross the film screen, it is evident that each pair consists of a man and a woman, "disallowing the possibility of a relationship between two (same sex) equals" (Benshoff 121). Laura, for

instance, spends the entire evening dancing with her boyfriend Carl, only leaving if a higher-ranking male, such as her uncle, Austrian General Spielsdorf, calls her over. The power dynamic between the sexes favours the male characters. As such, female characters must show respect towards the male characters and act according to their decisions. Emma Morton, for example, must leave the party early at Mr. Morton's request. While Laura asks if Emma truly must leave her birthday party at such an early hour, Mr. Morton responds for his daughter, insisting that they must go home due to the long journey (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:08:30-00:08:53). To go further, Mircalla's mother seeks forgiveness from her dance partner, General Spielsdorf, when she must promptly leave the party due to news of a sick relative (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:12:30-00:13:12). An apology that Mr. Morton did not owe General Spielsdorf as a man, but Mircalla's mother must give as a woman. She's also very timid in asking if her daughter may stay with his family, as it is not her place to be making requests when he holds the power of decision. This original, unthreatened state of the film universe is representative of heterosexual supremacy. The male is independent, powerful, and strong and, as such, superior to the weak and compliant women who must submit to him.

However, this power dynamic shifts as Mircalla, a woman unbound to a male figure, uses her sexuality to lure in victims and gain loyal servants (Baker 555). While the male characters are physically strong and can command their women, maids, and children, Mircalla "can dominate purely through mental strength" (Ellinger 35) and her sexuality. She is highly aware of her attractive figure, as her appearance at the ball had men lining up to dance with her (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:10:26), and she uses this to her advantage. For instance, after Mademoiselle Perrodot hears Emma's scream, she runs to the room to see

what has happened. Mircalla quickly walks in with a brooch, assuring the two women that the sharp pin on the jewellery caused the marks on Emma's chest. This quick thinking allows Mircalla to continue going undetected, while also allowing her to enchant Mademoiselle Perrodot to be her willing slave by placing the brooch on her. After they spend the night together, the bond between the pair is cemented (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:50:15-00:53:12). The relationship between Mircalla and Mademoiselle Perrodot is one involving same-sex intimacy, threatening the traditional heterosexual relationship as it removes the male figure in sexual relations. After engaging in this intimacy, Mademoiselle Perrodot is defiant towards Renton, the butler, not accepting any of his advice about Emma's illness, and snapping at him for trying to take charge (*The Vampire Lovers*, 01:03:02-01:03:06). Mircalla, now referred to as "Carmilla", is much stronger with her female companion and, the two go on to overthrow the power dynamic in the house. The vampire goes undetected by the butler, as his suspicions turn toward the maid. When he confesses these suspicions to Mircalla, she uses it as a chance to seduce him, resulting in his removal of the garlic flowers from Emma's room, along with the cross on her neck. Then, as he no longer serves a purpose, Mircalla kills him before they engage intimately (*The Vampire Lovers*, 01:13:57-01:19:25). "In turning to each other, [Mircalla and Mademoiselle Perrodot] triumph over and destroy men themselves" (Zimmerman 433). The lesbian vampire uses her bodily autonomy to gain power over the male individual, though she is uninterested in him as a sexual partner. Homosexual attraction is used to strengthen her schemes and allow other women to remove themselves from their male counterparts. The heterosexual male is thus unable to combat female autonomy or regain his role as the sexual partner, as noted by the defiance towards Renton and his subsequent death. The male character has no way to overpower this kind of female bond and agency, and thus, his superiority is called into question.

When representing lesbian romance within the vampire film, supernatural elements are expected to make an appearance as justification for why a woman would want to be with another woman as opposed to a man. Be it hypnosis, paralysis, compulsion, or any other form of violent supernatural force, this is what is supposed to draw in the female victim. Zimmermann explains this expectation by stating that it is not a lack on the part of the male as they simply cannot

compete with the supernatural forces of the vampire (Zimmermann 436). Zimmermann continues, suggesting that Mircalla's powers over Laura, "easily attracted [her] to a 'perverse' form of sexuality" (Zimmerman 435) as Cole's offering of "life through... his sexual potency (symbolized by sperm) cannot compete with the vampire who sucks away her life" (Zimmerman 436). However, the lesbian vampire is alluring even without her supernatural powers. Mircalla not only provided the sexual allure that a woman would usually seek out through men (as discussed in the previous paragraph), but she also provided her victims with more feminine care (Ellinger 39). This is especially visible in her relationship with Emma, while the two had several sensual exchanges, they also had moments of genuine care for one another. These include but are not limited to Emma holding 'Carmilla' who seemed distraught when the funeral service went by (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:45:34-00:46:35), how 'Carmilla' would read aloud a chapter from Emma's fairy tale book before bed, even though she thought they were ridiculous (*The Vampire Lovers*, 00:40:19-00:40:31) and 'Carmilla' attempting to bring Emma with her, valuing the young women too much to kill or to leave her (*The Vampire Lovers*, 1:20:37-1:20:41). This female bond is not easily replicated by the male, and as such the attraction between two women can be much stronger even without the use of supernatural forces. With that being said, the male is once again removed from the encounter, threatening his position as a lover, a husband and even a father if women can be happy with someone of the same sex.

To quell any of the male anxieties that had been brought to life on the screen, the lesbian vampire had to be destroyed at the end so that the heteronormative way of life could return (Baker 558). Mircalla is stabbed in the heart in her own grave, then promptly beheaded to ensure that she is dead and will no longer threaten the male's position within the film's universe (*The Vampire Lovers*, 1:28:11-1:29:09). When Mircalla is stabbed, Emma screams as if she has been struck by the stake as well. She then is taken into Carl's arms so he can comfort and protect her from further harm (*The Vampire Lovers*, 1:28:16-1:28:20). This shows a return to the male figure, as Emma is removed from her homosexual lover and left with Carl, a man who she does believe to be handsome, and perhaps she will marry to uphold the heterosexual way of life. However, that is entirely speculative of a viewer who has only watched the first film. The male characters living at the end of the film are then proper men who follow the rules set out by the heteronormative code that is embedded within

their society as well as ours, while the death of the female vampire acts as a removal of 'evil' or the 'bad' as she challenged the preconceived normalcy.

Challenging the traditional role of the male in heteronormative society, Mircalla's influence allows her female followers to temporarily question male superiority. While the second wave of feminism allowed women to seek more equal opportunities and brought forward shifts in gender roles and sexual identities, there was still a counter-culture full of doubts. Rooted deeply in conservative values, there was fear regarding the changes that role of the 'male' would undertake now that lesbianism had taken to mainstream media and may threaten the male presence in a relationship. These masculine fears are ever present within the lesbian vampire genre that blew up in the 1970s, as the vampire served as a symbol of sexuality. These fears were explored, often through the vilification of homosexual women, while the moral hero remained the male who is built around older, conservative Western views. There was little room for the new culture of the second wave of feminism to seep into working media. Women were not searching to overpower men and lesbians were not focused on stealing women away or coercing them. Everyone was simply looking for an equal opportunity to survive, and to be who they are.



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