Undying Shadows

Emily Sweeney

https://phsjournal.ie/article/pubid/58/

Policeman's Helmet Soup

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026

The *Policeman's Helmet Soup Journal* is supported and published by Dublin City University Library and the School of English.

https://phsjournal.ie/

Citation

Sweeney, Emily. 'Undying Shadows: Vampires and Villages in Gothic Literature'. Policeman's Helmet Soup [Dublin, Ireland], vol. 1, no. 1, 2026, pp. 40–48, https://phsjournal.ie/article/pubid/58/.

Published: April 2026

Undying Shadows:

Vampires and Villages in Gothic Literature

Emily Sweeney, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

This essay explores the role of vampires and abandoned villages as liminal symbols in nineteenth-century Gothic literature. Focusing on *Dracula* (1897), *Carmilla* (1872), *Dracula's Guest* (1914), and *The Family of the Vourdalak*, it examines how these figures and settings reflect cultural anxieties about memory, death, and rationality. Drawing on historical accounts by Elizabeth Gerard and William Wilkinson, as well as theological insights from Augustin Calmet, the essay argues that these Gothic motifs critique Enlightenment rationalism and embody unresolved historical trauma. Literary scholarship from Angela Wright further supports the genre's ambiguous nature and evolving relevance. Ultimately, the essay contends that vampires and villages in Gothic fiction serve as "undying shadows"—haunting remnants of a past that refuses to be buried.

Keywords: Gothic literature, vampires, liminality, abandoned villages, folklore and superstition, historical memory

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to the Corresponding Author: Emily Sweeney, emily.sweeney35@mail.dcu.ie

Emily Sweeney (née Williams) is a Dublin-based graduate of Dublin City University, where she studied Religious Education and English. She is a post-primary teacher of English and Religious Education at Assumption Secondary School, Walkinstown.

Conflicts statement: *There are no known conflicts of interest to disclose.*

Introduction

In Gothic literature, liminal spaces - thresholds between one state and another - are central to evoking horror and mystery. Vampires, who exist between life and death, and abandoned villages, poised between civilization and ruin, are among the most haunting of these spaces. This essay explores how vampires and deserted villages function as liminal symbols, revealing humanity's unresolved relationship with death, memory, and superstition. Drawing from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), *Dracula's Guest* (1914), J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), and Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy's *The Family of the Vourdalak*, I argue that both figures and settings critique modern rationalism while keeping the past alive in unsettling ways. Gothic literature often pits scientific progress against ancient belief, and these stories stage that conflict in uncanny forms. Vampires and abandoned villages stand where memory and fear collide.

Angela Wright states the Gothic "remains as nebulous a genre as the shadowy veiled figures which haunt its pages," a description which captures the ambiguity central to both the figures and settings explored in this essay (Wright 1). The phrase *Undying Shadows*, then, not only reflects the lingering presence of vampires and abandoned villages in Gothic literature, but also evokes the genre's resistance to fixed boundaries and definitions. Shadows, by their nature, are ephemeral and liminal - they signify something present yet obscured, known yet unknowable. The Gothic thrives in these in-between states, where clarity falters and dread takes shape. Just as the genre itself slips between horror, romance, folklore, and psychological exploration, so too do its most haunting images; figures that do not belong entirely to the world of the living or the dead, and places that do not exist entirely in the present or the past.

In *Dracula*, the vampire famously casts no shadow (Stoker 39), yet his presence is felt in darkened corners and creeping unease. In *Carmilla*, Laura repeatedly slips into shadowy states: "After all these dreams there remained on waking a remembrance of having been in a place very nearly dark" (Le Fanu 52). Shadows in these tales do not merely conceal, they disturb, marking a threshold where self and other, real and unreal, blur. They capture the central tension of the Gothic, what is remembered, repressed, and half-seen.

1. Vampires In-Between

Vampires are the ultimate liminal beings. Neither fully alive nor entirely dead, they embody humanity's anxieties about mortality and the persistence of the past. They cross boundaries - between life and death, predator and victim, past and present - violating natural order.

In *Dracula*, Stoker draws on Eastern European folklore to shape his vampire. Dracula's castle reflects his state: "The walls of my castle are broken; the shadows are many… I love the shade and the shadow, and would be alone with my thoughts when I may" (Stoker 24). He clings to the past, obsessed with ancestry, soil, and tradition. Jonathan Harker, overcome with dread, in his journal, writes: "I feel the dread of this horrible place overpowering me... I am encompassed about with terrors that I dare not think of" (Stoker 35). The unnatural presence of the vampire is vividly conveyed when Harker, having fallen asleep in an unfamiliar room despite Dracula's warning, is visited by the three mysterious women. As they approach him, he observes with

mounting unease: “though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor” (Stoker 39). Their lack of shadow emphasises their liminal nature, neither fully present nor entirely absent, and reinforces the Gothic motif of beings that defy both natural law and human comprehension.

Dracula himself transcends time. While Harker embodies Victorian rationality, the Count is a relic of medieval horror, a foreign noble haunting modern London. His foreignness, rituals, and power upset the order and certainty of Harker’s world. Even needing an invitation to enter reflects the tension between control and submission that defines his character. Dracula’s London is not safe or secular, it is porous, haunted by an old-world power capable of manipulating modernity’s blind spots.

In *The Family of the Vourdalak*, Tolstoy presents Gorcha, a patriarch who becomes undead after hunting a brigand. He returns at the cusp of a ten-day threshold, visibly changed; pale, cold, unsettling. He preys on his own family, a trait of the Slavic vourdalak. Tolstoy references Calmet, a cleric who chronicled supernatural tales: “They claim that in Bosnia and Hungary entire villages have become vourdalaks. Father Augustin Calmet… cites many frightening examples” (Tolstoy 4). Gorcha, like Dracula, becomes a figure of dread not only because of his monstrous state but because of the spiritual pollution he brings into the domestic space.

In *The Phantom World*, Calmet considers whether spirits or demons can appear bodily without divine permission: “it is impossible that they should appear clothed with a body except through a miracle; always supposing that God has not created them *naturally* capable of these operations,” (Calmet 377). Vampires, then, exist in an impossible space, physical yet not alive, spiritual yet not holy. This theological ambiguity enriches the Gothic vampire’s liminality, casting them as beings that defy the natural and divine orders alike.

Carmilla offers a different take on liminality. Carmilla is mysterious, seductive, and evasive. When Laura attempts to ask her questions about her past and family history, Carmilla deflects or avoids answering altogether. This evasiveness is captured in Laura’s observation: “She exercised with respect to herself... an ever wakeful reserve” (Le Fanu 28). Yet while Carmilla guards her background, she is unreserved in her physical and emotional displays of affection toward Laura. Her intimacy blurs emotional and bodily boundaries: “Her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses... ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one forever’” (Le Fanu 30). Laura finds herself disturbed by these advances, unable to understand the intensity of Carmilla’s desire, which feels more like the passion of a lover than a friend. This discomfort speaks to the transgressive, predatory nature of Carmilla’s presence.

These increasingly unsettling encounters often unfold in shadow. During Carmilla’s nocturnal feedings, Laura drifts into a half-conscious state: “The room rapidly darker and darker… I could no longer see anything… but its eyes” (Le Fanu 46). Though she does not consciously recognise Carmilla as the one who is feeding from her, the experience is deeply invasive. Shadows here symbolise more than just concealment, they suggest psychological

violation and the dissolution of identity. Carmilla's power lies in her ambiguity, in her ability to slip between guest and predator, woman and monster, without being fully detected.

Dracula, Gorcha, and Carmilla manipulate trust. They feed not just on blood but on connection, embedding themselves in social roles - father, guest, lover - before violating them. They are haunting because they break not only physical boundaries but also emotional and cultural ones. Calmet acknowledges the limits of reason in the face of such beings: "I better like to doubt prudently, than to affirm that which I know not" (Calmet 377). Vampires thrive where certainty fails, within the cracks of enlightenment logic and in the shadows of modern progress.

2. Abandoned Villages as Haunted Spaces

If vampires personify liminality, abandoned villages embody it in place. These sites, desolate, decaying, are loaded with memory and spectral presence. They are where history breaks into the present, often becoming landscapes where the spiritual and psychological collide. Their isolation reinforces the idea that they lie outside the bounds of time and reason.

In *Dracula's Guest*, the narrator finds a village emptied by fear. His guide, Johann, warns: "the living lived, and the dead were dead and not—not something" (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest* 11). Despite these warnings, the narrator insists on exploring alone, embodying a Victorian arrogance that dismisses folklore and superstition as backward. His rational confidence leads him into danger, suggesting that the supernatural is not simply fantasy but a force that punishes disbelief. As Elizabeth Gerard observed in her account of Transylvania, the natural landscape, its deep forests, lonely hills, and crumbling ruins, shapes a vivid folkloric imagination. She writes that the local people "have built up for themselves... a whole code of fanciful superstition, to which they adhere as closely as to their religion itself" (Gerard 326). The village in Stoker's tale thus mirrors Gerard's real-world observations of Eastern Europe as a place where the terrain itself seems haunted. The village is "desolation itself" (Stoker *Dracula's Guest* 13), an eerie reflection of what happens when ancient fears are ignored. The past lingers uneasily here, not yet laid to rest. Visited on Walpurgis Night, a liminal time associated with spirits, the location becomes symbolic of spiritual thresholds as well.

In *The Family of the Vourdalak*, d'Urfé lodges in a village that unravels under vampiric threat. Emotionally abandoned and later physically emptied, the hermit of the monastery observes: "Thanks to that infidel Gorcha there is no shortage of empty houses" (Tolstoy 19). The village, drained by undead forces, becomes a tomb for memory and kinship. Elizabeth Gerard, writing of similar villages in Transylvania, notes that belief in vampires was so entrenched that "there are probably few Roumanian villages where such [anti-vampire rituals] have not taken place within memory of the inhabitants" (Gerard 320). These rituals - burning hearts, driving stakes, and salting graves - suggest that villagers lived in constant negotiation with the undead. Tolstoy's depiction reflects this folkloric reality, reinforcing the vampire as a force that unravels both community and belief.

The historical reality of Eastern European desolation directly informs the Gothic trope of the abandoned village. William Wilkinson, writing in *An Account of the Principalities of*

Wallachia and Moldavia (1820), details how the region's villages and towns were continually destabilised by warfare, Turkish invasion, and shifting borders. He describes how these once-inhabited spaces "became a complete desert" by the eleventh century, due to prolonged depopulation and political upheaval (Wilkinson 12). Such historical erasure left behind scarred landscapes, silent remnants of a traumatised geography. Wilkinson also notes how towns were often "frequently annexed" and rebuilt, only to be destroyed again in cycles of violence and reclamation. These observations resonate with the Gothic portrayal of villages as places where the past is not merely remembered but still lingers. In texts like *Dracula* and *The Family of the Vourdalak*, the landscapes are shaped by collective memory and spectral presence, mirroring the violent history Wilkinson outlines. These haunted geographies do not just set the mood, they embody the very notion of liminality, serving as fractured thresholds between history and myth, habitation and desolation.

Similarly, in *Carmilla*, Laura's estate is near "a ruined village… in the aisle of which are the mouldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstein" (Le Fanu 5). These ruins mark both Carmilla's heritage and her power. Elizabeth Gerard explains that Transylvanian folklore emerged from a mix of Romanian, Saxon, and Roma traditions, stating that "all these kinds of superstition have twined and intermingled, acted and reacted upon each other" (Gerard 327). This layering of beliefs mirrors the overlapping cultural and historical tensions in *Carmilla*, where old family bloodlines intersect with emerging modern doubts. The ruins surrounding Laura's home act as repositories for these forgotten or repressed legacies.

Calmet's historical chapter, "Apparitions of Spirits Proved from History," helps ground this sense of spiritual persistence. He recounts that "the dead have often appeared to the living... and entered the houses wherein they dwelt before their decease" (Calmet 268). Such villages are not abandoned, they are haunted, still occupied by the past. Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* provides a useful lens here: he observes that "a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard 47). In this light, abandoned houses and ruins in Gothic literature are not simply derelict structures but emotionally charged spaces where memory lingers. These villages are not simply forgotten, they are repressed, and as Freud reminds us, the repressed always returns (Freud 1915). The ruins are a wound in the landscape, echoing the vampire's presence as a wound in the body of society.

3. Vampires and Villages in Complicity

The true horror of these stories lies in the union of creature and setting. Vampires need forgotten places to flourish, and abandoned villages echo their influence, silent, decayed, and heavy with the past. These haunted settings function as atmospheric extensions of the vampire's psychological influence, enfolding victims within a world of faded grandeur and quiet dread. Furthermore, literary scholar Angela Wright, citing Robin Sowerby, notes that "the word 'Gothic' has always been chiefly defined in contrasting juxtaposition to the Roman, and a constant factor in its various uses … has continued to be its antithesis to the Roman or classical" (Wright 1). While this originally referred to the Visigoths and Gothic tribes who stood in opposition to the Roman Empire, the term was later adapted to describe artistic and literary movements that similarly resisted classical ideals. In Gothic fiction, this oppositional spirit is

evident in its rejection of order, symmetry, and rationalism, and its embrace of wildness, mystery, and the supernatural. This framing reinforces the idea that both vampires and the spaces they haunt are constructed in deliberate defiance of Enlightenment clarity. Instead, they embody superstition, decay, and the uncanny. The environments in these texts do not merely house horror; they are active participants in sustaining it.

Dracula's own expression of timeless power and cruel mastery precedes the group's efforts to thwart him. In a moment of theatrical defiance, he boasts:

> "You think to baffle me, you---with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a butcher's. You shall be sorry yet, each one of you! You think you have left me without a place to rest; but I have more. My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine—my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed. Bah!" (Stoker 315).

This declaration reinforces Dracula's perceived dominance over space and time, establishing him as a creature whose sense of vengeance and control defies temporal logic. His contempt for the modern, rational protagonists underscores the vampire's embodiment of long-buried, resurgent forces that modernity cannot contain.

In stark contrast, Van Helsing's hybrid knowledge, part science, part superstition, is what allows the group to defeat the Count. He articulates the symbolic power of place when he says, "He has chosen this earth because it has been holy. Thus we defeat him with his own weapon, for we make it more holy still. It was sanctified to such use of man, now we sanctify it to God" (Stoker 306). Van Helsing's words express how the vampire's power is tied not only to his personhood but also to the space he corrupts. By reclaiming this ground through sacred ritual, the group symbolically and spiritually reclaims the past, purging it of Dracula's influence.

Calmet reflects a theological worldview that is both open to the supernatural and cautiously sceptical. He writes that "[I]t is a pure favour of the mercy of the power of God, and which he grants to very few persons, to make their appearance after death; for which reason we should be very much on our guard against all that is said, and all that we find written on the subject in books (Calmet 267). Calmet's caution suggests that while divine apparitions are not impossible, they are rare and should not be accepted uncritically. In this light, the vampire is not simply a monster or a common revenant, it becomes a troubling figure that blurs the lines between miracle, myth, and falsehood. The abandoned villages haunted by such figures are likewise spiritually unsettled, not sanctified spaces, but places marked by theological ambiguity and the danger of misreading signs. This uncertainty challenges the Enlightenment-era belief in human rationality and control, and forces Gothic fiction's characters, and readers, to confront mysteries that resist explanation.

Gothic literature thus refuses the clear-cut triumph of reason. The vampire and the village endure as reminders that history is not so easily erased, and that the past continues to shape the present in terrifying and tender ways. Together, they reveal the deep psychological and spiritual tension between what is seen and unseen, believed and dismissed, remembered and repressed.

Conclusion

Vampires and abandoned villages are not merely Gothic devices but deeply symbolic markers of humanity's continued entanglement with death, memory, and superstition. Their presence challenges the belief that modernity, science, or rationality can ever fully distance us from the past. In the texts examined - *Dracula*, *Dracula's Guest*, *Carmilla*, and *The Family of the Vourdalak* - vampires operate as living shadows of former ages, while the villages they haunt are memorials to forgotten suffering. Elizabeth Gerard's ethnographic insights confirm that these motifs are not only literary but grounded in enduring cultural practices and beliefs. Calmet's theological inquiries further frame these figures as not just monstrous, but morally and metaphysically complex. The interplay between the vampire and the village illustrates how space and being become intertwined in a Gothic meditation on what humanity chooses to remember, and what refuses to be forgotten. Shadows, after all, are cast not by absence but by presence. These undying shadows linger at the threshold, daring us to confront the histories we fear to see.

Ultimately, these narratives suggest that Gothic fiction continues to disturb and captivate because it forces confrontation with the unresolved: the past that shadows the present, the spiritual that resists secular erasure, and the spaces - both physical and psychological - that exist between. In light of the genre's enduring impact, Angela Wright, citing Michael Gamer, observes that Gothic fiction "must be defined in part by its ability to transplant itself across forms and media" (Wright 4), underscoring the continuing cultural relevance of vampires and villages as evolving Gothic archetypes.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston, and M. Jolas. *The Poetics of Space / Gaston Bachelard*. Translated by Maria Jolas, with a New Foreword by John R. Stilgoe. Beacon Press, 1994.

Calmet, Augustin. *The Phantom World : Or, the Philosophy of Spirits, Apparitions, Etc. Volume 1 / Augustin Calmet*. Translated by Henry Christmas, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Freud, Sigmund, et al. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol 11.* The Hogarth Press, 1973 pp. 141 – 158.

Gerard, Elizabeth. *The Land Beyond the Forest: Facts, Figures and Fancies from Transylvania, Volume 1.* William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London, 1888.

Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan, and Kathleen Costello-Sullivan. *Carmilla : A Critical Edition . Edited and with an Introduction by Kathleen Costello-Sullivan.* First edition. Syracuse University Press, 2013.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula: By Bram Stoker*. Archibald Constable and Company, 1897.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula's Guest And Other Stories.* The Floating Press, 1914: pp. 6 - 28.

Tolstoy, Alexis. *The Family of a Vourdalak*. Translated by Nina Zumel (pdf and EPUB versions available through her website: https://multoghost.wordpress.com/2013/12/28/the-family-of-a-vourdalak/)

Wilkinson, William. *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with Various Political Observations relating to them.* Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, London. 1820.

Wright, Angela. *Gothic Fiction / Angela Wright.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2007, doi:10.1007/978-1-137-03991-0.