

### The Psychological Conflict of Laura in *Carmilla* (1872) by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

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#### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis novella *Carmilla* (1872) untuk mengkaji konflik psikologis Laura, seorang perempuan muda yang hidup terisolasi bersama ayahnya di sebuah kastel terpencil. Pertemuannya dengan Carmilla, seorang pendatang misterius dan penuh afeksi yang kemudian terungkap sebagai vampir, menjadi pemicu munculnya konflik psikologis tersebut. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana konflik psikologis Laura direpresentasikan dengan menggunakan teori konflik psikologis Kurt Lewin. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menafsirkan makna tersirat di balik respons emosional, keputusan, dan motivasi Laura ketika menghadapi situasi yang kompleks dan berbahaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Laura mengalami ketiga jenis konflik psikologis, yaitu konflik mendekat-mendekat (*approach-approach*) yang muncul dari keinginannya akan pertemanan dan pertimbangan antara keselamatan dengan atau ketidakhadiran temannya, konflik menjauh-menjauh (*avoidance-avoidance*) yang berkaitan dengan mimpi buruk yang dialaminya serta dilema untuk mengungkapkannya kepada sang ayah, dan jenis konflik yang paling dominan adalah konflik pendekatan-penghindaran (*approach-avoidance*), yang ditandai oleh pergulatan Laura dalam menyelaraskan kasih sayang, kepercayaan, dan keinginannya akan kedekatan emosional dengan rasa takut, ketidakpastian, dan pengkhianatan. Konflik-konflik ini semakin intens ketika Laura mulai menyadari jati diri Carmilla yang sebenarnya. Dalam upaya menyelesaikan konflik psikologis tersebut, konsep valensi digunakan untuk memahami pilihan-pilihan mana yang dianggap Laura memiliki hasil yang lebih diinginkan (*valensi positif*) dan mana yang memiliki hasil yang tidak diinginkan serta cenderung dihindari (*valensi negatif*).

**Kata kunci:** karakter, konflik, konflik psikologi, novella

#### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the novella *Carmilla* (1872) to explore Laura's psychological conflict, a young woman living in isolation with her father in a secluded castle. Her encounter with Carmilla, a mysterious and affectionate stranger later revealed to be a vampire, becomes the catalyst for the psychological conflict. This study analyses how Laura's psychological conflict is represented using Kurt Lewin's theory of psychological conflict. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research interpreted the hidden meaning behind Laura's emotional responses, decisions, and motivations when facing complex and dangerous situations. The findings revealed that Laura experiences all three types of psychological conflict, namely the approach-approach conflicts arising from her longing for companionship and her safety with and without her friend, avoidance-avoidance conflicts connected to the nightmare she experienced, and the dilemma of whether to reveal them to her father, and the most dominant type is approach-avoidance conflict, marked by Laura's struggle to reconcile her affection, trust, and desire for emotional connection with fear, uncertainty, and betrayal. These conflicts intensify as Laura becomes increasingly aware of Carmilla's true nature. In resolving her psychological conflict, the concept of valence is used to understand which choices Laura considers to have a more desirable and beneficial outcome (positive valence) and which have more undesirable outcomes and should be avoided (negative valence).

**Keywords:** character, conflict, novella, psychological conflict

### A. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are complex individuals shaped by emotions, desires, and experiences that influence their identities and decisions. Although rational thinking guides logical choices, emotions and motivations also affect how individuals interpret information and act (Mlodinow, 2023). This complexity is often reflected in fictional characters, as writers portray emotions and dilemmas similar to those experienced in real life (Maslej et al., 2017). In literature, characters drive the narrative through their actions and interactions, which often generate conflict—an important element that motivates characters and shapes the plot (Ribó, 2019). Conflict is generally divided into two types: external conflict, arising from outside forces, and internal conflict, arising from a character's mind through emotional struggles or conflicting desires.

Among these forms, internal conflict is interesting to analyze because it reveals the psychological complexity of a character, allowing readers to understand a character's fears, motivations, and emotional struggles. Psychological approaches in literary analysis enable researchers to examine how mental and emotional states influence characters' behavior and decision-making. Psychology itself is the study of human behavior and the factors that shape it (Yimer, 2019), making it a useful framework for analyzing fictional characters.

Various psychological theories have been applied to study internal conflict in literature and one of them is Kurt Lewin's psychological conflict theory. A study by Adaninggar Septi Subekti et al (2020) examined the main character of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* using Lewin's classification of internal conflicts to identify the type of inner conflict the main character faces and its impact on his decision-making. Beyond the novel form, a study on the Paul Greengrass' film *Captain Phillips* by Rezki Amelia Anggraeni et al (2022) applied Lewin's theory to identify the types of psychological conflict the main character faces and avoidance-avoidance conflict being the dominant type, with mental stress and poor physical health as its impact.

Overall, these studies confirm that Lewin's theory is a useful analytical framework for the literature and media analysis, but most of them stop at classifying the types of conflict experienced by the character and focusing on internal or external factors, rather than exploring how internal motivations and external circumstances interact to shape the character's final decision, a dimension that was originally the main objective of of Lewin's framework (Levinger, 1957). Furthermore, not many study to date has applied Lewin's conflict theory to a novella, leaving open how this broader analytical framework might bring light to the psychological tension shaped by the character's internal and external factors. This study addresses that gap by using Lewin's model not only to classify the protagonist's conflicts but to examine how competing goals and situational pressures collectively drive the character's decision-making process.

This gap is particularly significant given the novella's distinct capacity for deeper exploration a character's psychological conflict due to its position between the short story and the novel, combining the narrative conciseness with sufficient scope for character development (Silverberg, 2010). With a single plot line, limited subplots, and a focused set of characters, the novella maintains narrative unity while enabling more depth for a character's psychological experiences, making it particularly suitable for the horror genre.

A notable example of a horror novella is *Carmilla* (1872), a Gothic novella by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu set in nineteenth-century Styria, Austria. The story follows Laura, a lonely young woman living in an isolated castle with her father, whose life changes when a mysterious

girl named Carmilla arrives and becomes her companion. As their relationship grows closer, Laura experiences recurring nightmares and unexplained weakness until it is revealed that Carmilla is a vampire responsible for the deaths of several young women, including Laura's declining health. Narrated from Laura's perspective as she recounts her experiences to Dr. Martin Hesselius, the story provides insight into her thoughts and emotions as she struggles with conflicting feelings of affection, trust, fear, and betrayal leading to the discovering Carmilla's true identity.

Laura's psychological struggle becomes central to the narrative, reflecting the tension between her emotional attachment to Carmilla and her fear of the supernatural threat. Using Kurt Lewin's psychological conflict theory, this study examines how Laura's internal emotions, such as loneliness, fear, and desire for companionship, interact with external factors, including Carmilla, her father, and the isolated castle setting. These factors, along with supernatural elements like nightmares and illness, intensify Laura's psychological tension and shape her responses throughout the story. Based on this context, the study addresses the research question: "How is psychological conflict represented in Laura in the novella *Carmilla* (1872)?" Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the forms of psychological conflict experienced by Laura using Kurt Lewin's theory.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Novella as Literary Work**

The novella occupies a middle position between the novel and the short story. Cariou (2002) defines it as a medium-length prose narrative, typically 15,000 to 50,000 words, characterized by a focused structure that generally avoids multiple subplots and extensive points of view, while emphasizing a limited number of characters and their psychological development. In Anglo-American literary criticism, the term *novella* evolved from the earlier definition of a "short prose narrative," and over time it came to denote a short novel positioned between the short story and the full-length novel in both length and complexity, making this form notably favored for its ability to present complex characters and ideas within a concise narrative structure (Steinhauer, 1978).

### **2. Psychology of Literature**

According to Klarer (2024), literature is a cultural and historical phenomenon shaped by the conditions of its creation and reception, while psychology is the scientific study of behavior and mental processes, including observable actions and internal activities such as thinking and imagining (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2011). Because both disciplines aim to understand human beings, they share a close connection (Dar, 2022). Wellek and Warren (2016) describe this relationship through the psychology of literature, which may examine the psychology of the author, the creative process, or the psychological aspects represented in literary characters. This study focuses on the third aspect by analyzing psychological elements reflected in characters. In this context, Carl Jung (in Dar, 2022) argues that the human mind is the source of both science and art, highlighting the role of psychological insight in influencing literary characters and their behaviors.

### **3. Character and Characterization**

In literary works, a character is defined as a person interpreted by readers as possessing moral qualities and particular tendencies, which are revealed through speech and actions

(Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Based on the complexity of these traits, characters are generally categorized into two types: flat characters, defined by a limited number of traits and tend to remain simple and easily recognizable; and round characters who possess multiple and sometimes contradictory traits, making them psychologically complex and more similar to real human beings (Ribó, 2019).

The portrayal of these characters is achieved through characterization, which refers to the techniques used by authors to present and distinguish characters in literary works (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Characterization can be conveyed through two primary methods: direct characterization, which occurs when the narrator explicitly describes a character's traits, and indirect characterization. In contrast, indirect characterization reveals a character's traits through their speech, thoughts, physical appearance, actions, and their effects on other characters, allowing readers to interpret the character's personality through narrative evidence (Ribó, 2019).

#### **4. Conflict**

Conflict is a fundamental element in narrative, defined as the opposition between two or more forces that creates tension within a story (Cuddon, 2013; Roberts & Zweig, 2012). Cuddon (2013) further explains that conflict often appears as tension or direct opposition between characters in literary works such as fiction, drama, and narrative poetry. In general, conflict can be divided into two categories: external conflict, which occurs when a character struggles against outside forces, such as other characters, society, or nature, and internal conflict, which refers to the struggle within a character's mind, often arising from the difficulty of choosing between conflicting desires or options (Lamb, 2008).

#### **5. Psychological Conflicts**

Kurt Lewin (1935) defines psychological conflict as a struggle within the psychological environment in which opposing forces of similar strength influence an individual's decision. These forces may originate internally, such as from thoughts and emotions, or externally from other people and environmental factors (Levinger, 1957). Lewin explains that individuals are either drawn toward desirable goals (approach) or pushed away from undesirable ones (avoidance). To resolve this conflict, he introduces the concept of valence, which refers to the attractive or repulsive motivational force of a goal or situation. Positive valence encourages approach, while negative valence leads to avoidance. Based on these dynamics, Lewin identifies three types of psychological conflict: approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, and approach–avoidance conflict (Levinger, 1957).

##### **a. Approach-Approach Conflict**

Approach–approach conflict occurs when an individual must choose between two desirable options, both offering positive outcomes (Lewin, 1935; Engler, 2014). The conflict arises from the difficulty of selecting between equally appealing alternatives, often producing mild tension during the decision-making process. This type of conflict is generally the least stressful because either option leads to a positive result, although the chosen option may sometimes appear less favorable than the unselected one, leading to possible regret (Lewin, 1935).

##### **b. Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict**

Avoidance–avoidance conflict occurs when an individual must choose between two undesirable options, each associated with negative consequences (Lewin, 1935; Engler, 2014). In this situation, the individual is motivated to avoid both options but is forced to choose one because the situation cannot be entirely avoided. As a result, the conflict often produces strong

psychological tension, indecision, and emotional discomfort. Compared to approach–approach conflict, avoidance–avoidance conflict is generally more stressful because neither option provides satisfaction, and feelings of dissatisfaction may persist even after a decision is made (Lewin, 1935).

### c. Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Approach–avoidance conflict occurs when an individual faces options that contain both desirable and undesirable aspects (Lewin, 1935; Engler, 2014). Although one option may appear more attractive because of its greater positive valence, it may also carry significant negative consequences. This mixture of positive and negative valences often produces strong indecision, anxiety, and emotional tension, as choosing one option requires accepting its drawbacks while losing the benefits of the other. As a result, individuals may delay decisions, shift preferences repeatedly, or feel dissatisfied even after making a choice (Lewin, 1935).

## C. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of psychological conflict in Laura, the main character of *Carmilla* (1872) by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Descriptive qualitative research interprets phenomena within their natural context and organizes findings into themes while remaining close to the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The data consisted of words, phrases, and sentences taken from a 110-page digital edition published by Duke Classics. The researcher served as the primary research instrument, collecting the data through observational reading to identify passages that reflected Laura’s psychological conflicts (McKechnie, 2008). The data were then analyzed using Creswell and Creswell (2023)’s procedure, which are organized the data, coded the data, and analyzed according to the three types of psychological conflict proposed by Kurt Lewin, approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, and approach–avoidance to identify the themes, interpret the character’s conflicts throughout the narrative, and lastly conclude the research.

## D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Findings

The findings show that Laura’s psychological conflicts in *Carmilla* are reflected through the framework of Kurt Lewin’s conflict theory, which includes approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, and approach–avoidance conflicts. Laura is portrayed as gentle, emotionally sensitive, and inexperienced due to her sheltered upbringing and isolated environment, which create a strong need for companionship. This vulnerability draws her toward Carmilla’s affection while simultaneously causing doubt and unease. As a result, Laura’s conflicts arise from both internal factors, such as desire and hesitation, and external influences, including her relationships and the supernatural environment, requiring her to evaluate choices based on their positive or negative valence.

#### a. Approach-Approach Conflict

Approach–approach conflict occurs when an individual must choose between two desirable options, both offering positive outcomes (Lewin, 1935; Engler, 2014). This type of conflict produces mild tension because the difficulty lies in choosing between equally appealing alternatives, though it is generally the least stressful, since either choice leads to satisfaction. In

*Carmilla*, this conflict appears when Laura and her father encounter a carriage accident near their manor and are asked to host a woman's sick daughter during her journey. Laura eagerly supports the request and persuades her father to allow the girl to stay.

### DATA 2:

I plucked my father by the coat, and whispered earnestly in his ear: **"Oh! papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us—it would be so delightful. Do, pray."** (Le Fanu, Ap-Ap, p. 18).

Laura experiences this conflict through her desire for companionship, which motivates her to persuade her father to allow the girl to stay. Her request, "Oh! Papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us—it would be so delightful," reflects her wish to gain a companion while still respecting her father's authority. In this situation, Laura must balance her desire for companionship (approach) with her wish to remain obedient to her father (approach). To resolve the conflict, she chooses the option with stronger positive valence by seeking her father's approval rather than acting independently. This approach both fulfills her desire for companionship and maintains her role as a respectful daughter, thus convincing her father to allow the girl to stay in their home.

Another approach-approach conflict can be seen after Laura's confrontation with Carmilla in the chapel. Carmilla is never seen again, and the quest is deemed a success. However, the disappearance of her friend conflicted her: she missed Carmilla and their friendship, yet Laura's health improved after Carmilla was gone. This conflict is evident through Laura's thought process about the event, as seen in this data.

### DATA 12:

**...But my satisfaction was changed to dismay, on discovering that there were no tidings of Carmilla. (...) no explanation was offered to me, and it was clear that it was a secret which my father for the present determined to keep from me.**

**The disappearance of Carmilla was followed by the discontinuance of my nightly sufferings** (Le Fanu, Ap-Ap, p. 103).

This passage illustrates Laura's experience of an approach-approach conflict. Although she seeks the truth about Carmilla's disappearance, Laura feels dissatisfied when no explanation is given, even by her father, which leads her to worry about Carmilla's condition (approach). At the same time, Carmilla's absence frees Laura from the nightmares and suffering she previously experienced (approach). In resolving this conflict, Laura chooses the option with stronger positive valence, which is her safety and recovery, despite the loss of her relationship with Carmilla.

### b. Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict

Avoidance-avoidance conflict occurs when an individual must choose between two undesirable options, both involving negative consequences (Lewin, 1935; Engler, 2014). Because neither choice is appealing, the situation produces anxiety, indecision, and psychological tension. In *Carmilla*, Laura experiences this conflict in a nightmare in which a terrifying creature resembling a black cat approach and attacks her in her dark bedroom.

### DATA 7:

I had a dream that night that was the beginning of a very strange agony.

I cannot call it a nightmare, for I was quite conscious of being asleep.

(...) I saw something moving round the foot of the bed, which at first, I could not accurately distinguish. But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat.

(..) **I could not cry out, although as you may suppose, I was terrified. (...) The two broad**

**eyes approached my face, and suddenly I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast. I waked with a scream...** (Le Fanu, Av-Av, p. 52).

In this scenario, Laura faces two undesirable options: confronting the creature despite her fear (avoidance) or remaining passive and risking attack (avoidance). Although she attempts to resist by trying to cry out, her fear prevents her from doing so. Unable to confront the creature, the negative valence pushed her to avoid the first option, allowing the creature to approach and harm her.

The second avoidance-avoidance conflict happened the day after Laura's nightmare, when she felt conflicted about telling her father about her terrifying nightmare. This data lays out Laura's thought process as she navigates this conflict.

### DATA 8:

**...I should have told papa, but for two opposite reasons. At one time I thought he would laugh at my story, and I could not bear its being treated as a jest; and at another I thought he might fancy that I had been attacked by the mysterious complaint which had invaded our neighborhood. I had myself no misgiving of the kind, and as he had been rather an invalid for some time, I was afraid of alarming him.** I was comfortable enough with my good-natured companions, Madame Perrodon, and the vivacious Mademoiselle Lafontaine. They both perceived that I was out of spirits and nervous, and at length I told them what lay so heavy at my heart (Le Fanu, Av-Av, p. 53).

In this passage, Laura faces an avoidance-avoidance conflict between telling her father about her nightmare or keeping it to herself. She fears that telling him might lead to ridicule or cause him unnecessary worry (avoidance), while remaining silent could risk greater concern if something later happened to her (avoidance). To resolve this conflict, the negative valence pushed Laura avoid telling her father and instead shares her experience with the maids, Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle Lafontaine, who respond with understanding and comfort.

### c. Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Approach-avoidance conflict occurs when a choice contains both positive and negative valences, creating strong hesitation and emotional tension (Kurt Lewin, 1935;Engler, 2014). In *Carmilla*, this conflict appears during a conversation between Laura and the mysterious girl, who claims they met in childhood and describes their reunion as destined. Drawn to Laura, she asks whether Laura feels the same, prompting Laura to reflect on the request as she tries to understand her mixed feelings toward the girl.

### DATA 3:

**...Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, "drawn towards her," but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging** (Le Fanu, Ap-Ap, pp. 28-29).

In this passage, Laura experiences an approach-avoidance conflict as she responds to the girl's question. Although she feels drawn to the girl's beauty and engaging personality (approach), she simultaneously experiences a sense of unease and repulsion (avoidance). To resolve the conflict, the positive valence of attraction prevails over her hesitation, leading Laura to accept the girl as her friend.

Another approach–avoidance conflict in Carmilla occurs when Laura, her father, and General Spielsdorf visit the ruins of the Karnstein estate to uncover the truth about Carmilla. When Carmilla suddenly appears, Laura attempts to greet her, but General Spielsdorf attacks in shock. The confrontation escalates as Carmilla transforms into a monstrous being, triggering Laura's internal conflict between her affection for Carmilla and the fear caused by her terrifying transformation.

### DATA 11:

Under a narrow, arched doorway, (...) I saw very gladly the beautiful face and figure of Carmilla enter the shadowy chapel. **I was just about to rise and speak, and nodded smiling, in answer to her peculiarly engaging smile;** when with a cry, the old man by my side caught up the woodman's hatchet, and started forward. **On seeing him a brutalized change came over her features. It was an instantaneous and horrible transformation, as she made a crouching step backwards. Before I could utter a scream...** (Laura, Ap-Av, p. 98).

In this passage, Laura initially responds to Carmilla with trust, greeting her with a smile despite the warnings she had heard, a sign that Laura still trusts her friend (approach). However, when General Spielsdorf suddenly attacks and Carmilla transforms into a monstrous figure, Laura's trust collapses, turning into fear (avoidance). In the end, the negative valence of the terrifying revelation leads Laura to abandon her trust and accept that Carmilla is dangerous.

## 2. Discussion

This section discusses the research findings by applying Kurt Lewin's conflict theory to Laura's psychological experiences in *Carmilla*. The analysis reveals that Laura encounters all three types of psychological conflict: approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, and approach–avoidance. Approach–approach conflicts appear when Laura must choose between two desirable outcomes, such as her desire for companionship and her wish to please her father, as well as later when she must balance emotional attachment to Carmilla with her need for safety. Avoidance–avoidance conflicts emerge in situations involving two undesirable choices, including her nightmare encounter with a monstrous figure and her hesitation about telling her father about it. However, approach–avoidance conflict is the dominant one, recurring throughout the narrative as Laura experiences simultaneous attraction and fear toward Carmilla.

These findings indicate that Laura's conflicts extend beyond simple fear or fascination and instead reflect complex motivations shaped by desire, curiosity, affection, and self-protection. The dominance of approach–avoidance conflict places Laura in a persistent state of ambivalence, as the companionship and affection she seeks from Carmilla also threaten her safety. This tension contributes to Laura's character development, transforming her from a lonely young woman seeking connection into someone increasingly aware of the danger surrounding her. The study demonstrates that Lewin's conflict theory provides a useful framework for understanding the psychological depth of literary characters and highlights its potential for further research in literary psychology.

Compared to the previous studies, the findings of this research share similarities and differences in several aspect. In the study by Subekti et al (2020), both studies identify approach–avoidance conflict as the dominant type experienced by the main character. However, the two studies differ in how this conflict is resolved. Okonkwo sees positivity in every choice as he uses social pressure to improve himself, while Laura remains wary of the negative consequences of her desired option, restraining her curiosity about Carmilla to avoid conflict and creating unnecessary quarrels. Similarly, this study reinforces the findings of Anggreani et al (2022) in

identifying avoidance-avoidance conflict as the same type of conflict, which in this case manifests as a life-threatening dilemma, where the two main characters must choose the least undesirable among two unfavorable choices to minimize harm. This similarity is evident in Captain Phillips's decision to risk being shot to save his crew. However, Laura has a different response to this same type of conflict: instead of confronting the threat directly, she chooses to remain silent rather than fight the monster.

### E. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Laura's psychological conflicts in *Carmilla* are effectively explained through Kurt Lewin's conflict theory, which reveals the complexity of her emotional struggles. The analysis identifies all three types of conflict, approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, and approach–avoidance, which influence Laura's development throughout the narrative. Approach–approach conflicts reflect her competing desires for companionship, safety, and familial approval, while avoidance–avoidance conflicts reveal the distress she experiences when facing equally undesirable choices. The most dominant conflict, approach–avoidance conflict, highlights her ambivalent relationship with Carmilla, who represents both the affection she longs for and the danger she fears.

Overall, the findings show that Laura's inner struggles extend beyond simple fear or fascination, portraying her as a character torn between desire and self-protection, which contributes to her psychological growth. However, this study is limited to identifying and classifying these conflicts without fully examining how other intrinsic elements of fiction shape them. Therefore, future research is encouraged to apply Kelly Griffith (2011)'s theory of intrinsic elements to explore how aspects such as theme, plot, setting, and point of view interact with and deepen the representation of psychological conflict in the narrative.

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