

# Cruising and Code

Embracing the Radical Queer and Erotic Self in Eric Stenbock's "The True Story of a Vampire" (1894)

IAN M. CLARK

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*Abstract: In homophobic cultures, "cruising," or the clandestine pursuit of sexual relations with strangers, is both a pleasurable act and a means of connecting with other queer individuals. This article utilises cruising as an analytical and methodological framework through which to examine Eric Stenbock's "The True Story of a Vampire" (1894) as the author's allegorical effort to combat his social and sexual isolation. Reading Stenbock's text through this subcultural queer practice reconfigures the archetypal "stranger"—here, the vampire Count Vardalek—from simply threatening to also a personification of potential pleasure and queer community. This reading expands upon recent work in queer theory that argues the artistic works of fin-de-siècle aesthetes were a means of gaining sexual self-knowledge and a sense of personal independence within systemic oppression. These critical re-readings call attention to the often subliminal or coded language of queer expression within art; as such, this article posits the benefits of applying queer practices like cruising to literary analysis, particularly toward texts only publishable if their queer themes remain subtextual.*

Like Eric Stenbock's polyglot vampire, to be a queer Victorian male was to be fluent in many languages. One such language was the discrete system of coded signals that communicated sexual availability between men; or, as it is called today, *cruising*. This article examines the textual parallels between the subcultural practice of cruising and literary vampirism as they appear in "The True Story of a Vampire" (1894) to demonstrate that the instantaneous and anonymous connection between the titular Count Vardalek and Gabriel, his paramour and eventual victim, suggests

the silent language of queer recognition and pursuit of sexual adventure. Reading Stenbock's text through the lens of cruising recontextualises the anonymous "stranger"—here, the vampire—as both threatening and an opportunity for pleasure and queer community. Though, Gabriel's death reflects that, for Victorians, this pursuit could be as lethal as vampirism.

By embracing Stenbock's vampirism as concomitant with cruising, Vardalek and Gabriel's attraction transcends "vampire" and "victim" to become instead an allegorical affirmation of queer sexual self-expression. This analysis expands on recent work in queer theory, particularly Friedman (2019), that argues the artistic output from *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes was a means of gaining sexual self-knowledge (2) and a sense of personal independence within the structures of oppression that otherwise shaped their lives (3). These critical re-readings call attention to the often subliminal or coded language of queer expression within Decadent art. Indeed, "True Story" evidences that then-illegal queer identities and sexual practices covertly flourished in the works of aesthetes like Stenbock and are now preserved in the autobiographic legacies that are available to us today.

Although I examine Gabriel and Vardalek's dynamic as mutually affirming, it must be noted that this connection is innately coercive due to their differences in age and agency. Certainly, "True Story" is today inextricable from its pedophilic elements, particularly as homosexuality and pedophilia become increasingly interchangeable in homophobic circles.<sup>1</sup> Gabriel's youthfulness is established early and prominently through his relationships with the few other members of his household. He is approximately one year younger than his sister Carmela, who self-identifies as "a little girl of about thirteen" during the events of the story; both are "children of [their father's] old age," and each still requires the care of a governess (Stenbock). Vardalek's age is more ambiguous. Carmela, also the narrator, recalls she "could not possibly guess his age" (Stenbock), but his ability to travel without chaperones, his worldliness, and his rapport with their elderly father indicates that he is an adult who may be even older than he appears. Trevor Holmes suggests

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1 Coincidentally, this homophobic connection is traceable to Stenbock's lifetime. The late-century "West End scandals," particularly the Dublin Castle (1884) and Cleveland Street (1889) affairs, shaped the public's perception of homosexuality as predominantly aristocratic men exploiting under-aged, working-class boys (Cook 167). Vardalek's behaviour is easily aligned with the modern term "grooming," which describes the process of an adult identifying and preparing a child or other vulnerable person for sexual abuse by gaining then exploiting their trust. Grooming also encourages victims to keep this abuse a secret both during and after periods of abuse (Leary 120).

the story's pedophilic elements may reflect Stenbock's interest in a "Classics-inflected cult of youth" (176), thus making Gabriel and Vardalek's age discrepancy part of the neo-Hellenic movement to revive sexual and cultural mentorship between boys and men (pederasty).<sup>2</sup> Gabriel's youth is undoubtedly critical to his character because it heightens his vulnerability as a sexual partner and a vampire's prey. However, his relationship with Vardalek lacks the mentorship element that is essential to neo-Hellenists' interest in reviving pederasty, and so I am disinclined to utilise a "cult of youth" or pederasty as analytical frameworks for this text.

Others have persuasively read the central pairing as an autobiographical experiment in which Gabriel and Vardalek symbolise aspects of the author's life. "Vardalek," Francis King writes, "is Stenbock himself," as evidenced by their shared class status as counts, their feminine and rather unattractive appearance, and their entrancing skills on the piano (qtd. Adlard 9).<sup>3</sup> John Adlard expands King's biographical reading by drawing parallels between Stenbock and Gabriel's mutual preference for animals over people, observing that "[Gabriel's] menagerie at the castle in Styria matches Stenbock's collection of animals at the great house of Kolk in Estonia kept mostly in an apartment under the roof reminiscent of Gabriel's turret retreat" (10). Also in Stenbock's history is the "Little Count," a life-sized doll that he travelled with and anxiously took care of at great expense (Bojti, "Nineteenth-Century Sexology" 182). Zsolt Bojti argues that the author's emotional dependency on the "Little Count" correlates with Vardalek's infatuation with Gabriel, and that their fictional relationship articulates both Stenbock's tragic affection for his doll and an identification with its symbolic youthful innocence (182–183).

I understand Gabriel and Vardalek as fictionalised aspects of Stenbock's anxiety toward mortality and his isolating sexual queerness. An autobiographical reading is further supported by accounts from Stenbock's life in which he used vampirism as a metaphor to understand his sexual and social alienation (Cameron 45). Analysing the text as a literary amalgamation of Stenbock's erotic and neurotic tendencies—tendencies shaped by the homophobic culture in which he lived—reveals Gabriel and Vardalek's pairing to be an exploration of how the search for queer

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2 Stenbock and his Decadent peers John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and Simeon Solomon drew inspiration from texts like Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium* to romanticise an older man's love for a beautiful youth as part of a mutual education in personal fulfilment and self-improvement (Cook 125).

3 Special thanks to the reviewer of this article for introducing me to Trevor Holmes' and John Adlard's respective works on this subject.

community creates both liberatory and dangerous connections, sometimes simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> This tension, I argue, is symbolised through vampirism and its parallels with cruising. Vardalek is more than a stranger and Gabriel is more than his victim—together, they are Stenbock’s radical embrace of his queer and erotic self.

Published in 1894 between Sheridan Le Fanu’s sapphic novella *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker’s homoerotic *Dracula* (1897), Stenbock’s work similarly lives in the rich literary intersection of vampirism and queerness. Written in post-Labouchère Amendment (1885) England,<sup>5</sup> “True Story” was conceived in a deeply homophobic social context, one that forced those with non-heterosexual desires to live, romance, and enjoy sex within the figurative margins. The importance of secrecy, or rather, necessary cautiousness, in reality is here reflected allegorically through Stenbock’s recurrent use of homoerotic subtext and its simultaneous invisibility to normative (i.e. not overtly sexually queered) characters. Though, while Gabriel and Vardalek’s attraction goes unscrutinised by the former’s father and sister, their sexualised bond seems evident nearly to the point of becoming textual; that is, if the reader wishes to see it. To fully uncover the queer coding in “True Story,” readers must adopt the pair’s shared secretive language and cruise the text itself.

Cruising is by definition fleeting, comprised of ephemeral moments not meant to be captured (Turner 10). As Mark Turner notes in *Backward Glances* (2003), his historical study on nineteenth-century cruising, the problem with writing about this practice is that “it doesn’t remain static, it passes quickly, it’s over in the time it takes to shift one’s eye” (10). How, then, can we apply cruising to a relationship that lasts far longer than a momentary, one-time encounter? Moreover, why apply cruising as an analytical framework to literature, whose relatively static form is incongruent with the ephemeral nature of cruising? I posit that, while Gabriel and Vardalek identify the other’s queerness and their mutual attraction through encoded forms of communication, and do indeed create an intense emotional and sexualised bond, they always remain strangers to each other, the narrator, and the reader. This

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4 That their pairing is non-consensual in addition to its coercive vampiric context warrants analysis that extends beyond the focus of this article.

5 This amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act expanded the illegalities of male-male sex beyond sodomy to the more flexible (and thus more easily enforceable) crime of “indecency between males” (McLaren 18). However, the influence of these laws should not be oversimplified; as H. G. Cocks explains, these were particularly public moments within an otherwise “sustained, unspectacular, insidious, everyday and even familiar” process of systematised homophobia that began in the previous century (6).

is not a negative characterisation. Instead, their being strangers allows for sexual exploration without concern toward future responsibilities or the necessary tending long-term relationships require. Further, the opacity of anonymity is an ethical question of how one perceives the foreign, or Other, and thus encourages self-reflection on one's willingness or ability to accept something—or someone—outside of the familiar. In short, is the stranger to be feared, to be enjoyed, or as we see with Vardalek, both?

Cruising responds to this situational friction by discerning and facilitating the erotic possibilities latent in an encounter with Otherness (Dean 179). On the social dynamics of cruising, queer theorist Tim Dean argues that its fleetingness is ironically a means of building community, because it “exemplifies a distinctive ethic of openness to alterity” that encourages us to reconsider the “stranger” as a threatening figure (176). “[The] ethics of cruising,” Dean writes, “is a matter not of how many people one has sex with or what kind of sex one has with them ... but of how one treats the other and, more specifically how one treats his or her own otherness” (177). This tension between seduction and unknowable risk is essential to Gabriel and Vardalek's connection; certainly, Gabriel's attraction to the stranger is, from the beginning, encoded as overtly dangerous—yet welcome. This is demonstrated with their initial meeting: “Gabriel stood stock-still, with a startled look, like that of a bird fascinated by a serpent. But nevertheless he held out his hand to the newcomer” (Stenbock). With this line Stenbock positions Gabriel as knowingly vulnerable prey to Vardalek's carnivorous predator, though, as importantly, he still accepts the presence and touch of the possibly dangerous “newcomer.” Gabriel's extended hand symbolises his choice regarding the ethical question of accepting intimacy from a stranger. By embracing the unknown, Gabriel is choosing community and all its potential pleasures, even with its potential risks.

More than just strangers to each other, Gabriel and Vardalek are enigmas to the reader and even to Carmela, Gabriel's sister and the otherwise-omniscient narrator. This strangeness is emphasised in Vardalek's introduction, where Carmela describes him as essentially unknowable. Contrary to the archetypal framing of vampires as arcane, nocturnal, isolated creatures, Vardalek is social and “arrived by the commonplace means of the railway train, and in the afternoon” (Stenbock). His appearance likewise defies Carmela's (and perhaps the reader's) expectations: “Vampires are generally described as dark, sinister-looking, and singularly handsome. Our Vampire was, on the contrary, rather fair, and certainly

was not at first sight sinister-looking, and though decidedly attractive in appearance, not what one would call singularly handsome” (Stenbock). From this introduction, Vardalek is most strongly characterised as unremarkable. Unlike the literary vampire forefathers that Carmela alludes to, Vardalek is neither overtly monstrous nor startlingly beautiful; he travels by train, just like any other “commonplace” modern gentleman. Also notable is Carmela’s use of “our” to position the reader alongside her disorientation from Vardalek’s non-conformity to vampiric archetypes. Her use of pronoun here either encourages the reader to align with her perspective on the queer stranger, or, depending on the reader’s orientation, it suggests that the reader, too, has passed her detection.

In one reading, Vardalek’s ability to inconspicuously “pass” in human society is what makes him dangerous and frightening—he is a predator who walks undetected amongst his prey. However, such a reading ungenerously situates Vardalek as a purely parasitic figure and contradicts later evidence that he can and does form attachments. Vardalek is, then, the unknowable stranger whose mundanity subverts Carmela’s expectations of the archetypal vampire; he is also Dean’s theoretical stranger who, through the freedom of anonymity, can form welcomed emotional and sexual connections. Gabriel is similarly opaque to our narrator, despite the two being siblings. Carmela tells us, “I find it difficult to describe my brother ... there was something about him strange and superhuman, or perhaps I should rather say *præterhuman*, something between the animal and the divine” (Stenbock). Most essential here is the narrator’s difficulty in describing Gabriel; even to his sister, there is an unknowable quality to him that escapes and defies established boundaries. His mysterious fluidity, like moving between categories of species and planes (“between the animal and the divine”) is likewise represented by his name, which is interchangeably written as Gabriel, Gabryel, and Gavril. Whereas Vardalek is a stranger because he defies expectation, Gabriel is a stranger because of his indefinable qualities and malleable, unstable identity.

Although Carmela can sometimes recognise that Gabriel, Vardalek, and their connection are unusual, she cannot discern the exact qualities of these peculiarities, particularly their latent homoeroticism. This shadow of queerness is exemplified when Carmela casually mentions the Count’s frequent excursions to Trieste, a city in present-day Italy:

he always came back, bringing us presents of strange Oriental jewellery or textures. I knew all kinds of people came to Trieste, Orientals included. Still, there was a strangeness and magnificence about these things which I was sure even then could not possibly have come from such a place as Trieste, memorable to me chiefly for its necktie shops. (Stenbock)

It is fitting that Carmela only understands Trieste as an unremarkable place known chiefly for its neckties, an item that is nearly satirical in its symbolism for restrictive respectability. Though her normative perspective finds nothing suspect in Vardalek's trips, closer inspection reveals Trieste to be a signifier for his—and the text's—implicit queerness. By Stenbock's time the city of Trieste was known for its sex tourism industry, but in the previous century it was infamous as the murder site of the prominent German art historian—and notable homosexual—Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Winckelmann, an early intellectual pioneer of neo-Classicism, was killed in 1768 by his much-younger lover, Francesco Arcangeli, who was subsequently executed by breaking on the wheel outside of the hotel in which the two resided (Benadusi et al. 18). Trieste's most well-known affair is in effect an inverted "True Story": rather than the older and foreign man (Vardalek) killing his young lover (Gabriel), in Trieste the older and foreign man (Winckelmann) is murdered by his younger, local lover (Arcangeli).

Should this prominent episode<sup>6</sup> in queer Hellenist history be an origin for "True Story," its structural inversion would reflect the city's reputation as a space in which identities become fractured through the prism of an ever-moving, diverse population. Indeed, the real Trieste was a crossroad between empires, geographically situated at the crux of the Southern Mediterranean and Northern Europe; though it lacked a unifying national identity, the city was "well endowed with a cosmopolitan one" (Benadusi et al. 18). In Carmela's above narration, Trieste mirrors Vardalek in that both are defined by their bustling liminality, each constituted by transient moments between "all kinds of people" rather than ongoing, concrete relationships. When read with the city's socio-historical context, Vardalek's trips and exotic treasures become an implicit yet conspicuous reference to what many of Stenbock's Hellenist

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6 Historians Lorenzo Benadusi et al. deem Winckelmann's killing "one of the most impressive events of the [eighteenth] century" (17). Notably, Arcangeli was only tried for murder and not for crimes relating to homosexuality.

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peers would recognise as Trieste's greatest scandal. However, the same connections go undetected by Carmela, whose normative gaze only allows her to see the city as a collection of necktie shops.

Narratively, Carmela's ignorance of this moment in queer history prevents her from detecting Trieste's inclusion as foreshadowing Gabriel and Vardalek's lethal affair. Moreover, the passage continues Stenbock's efforts to hide allusions to homosexuality within plain sight of the reader, should they also be fluent in its references. The scene's queer metaphor extends to Vardalek and Trieste's shared fluid cosmopolitanism, a state in which distinctions between peoples evade rigid cultural and political boundaries. Just as Gabriel's queerness is shown in part by the plasticity of his name, Vardalek, too, is queered by transcending categorisation through any one language or nationality. Consider the following description:

He was announced under the name of Count Vardalek—the name being Hungarian. But he spoke German well enough: not with the monotonous accentuation of Hungarians, but rather, if anything, with a slight Slavonic intonation ... We soon afterwards found that he could talk Polish, and Mlle Vonnaert [our governess] vouched for his good French. Indeed he seemed to know all languages. (Stenbock)

From Carmela's account, Vardalek is a wanderer untied to any specific country or dialect—he personifies the same transience exemplified in Trieste's geographic, cultural, and sexual *mélange*. Vardalek and Gabriel's mutual acceptance of new experiences and people distinguishes them from the comparatively closed-minded Carmela. It also effectually entrenches queerness as synonymous with an openness to alterity within the narrative.

Gabriel and Vardalek's fluency with diverse and innately fluid forms of communication likewise extends to the body, as evidenced by this physical exchange when the two first meet:

[Gabriel] held out his hand to the newcomer. Vardalek, taking his hand—I don't know why I noticed this trivial thing—pressed the pulse with his forefinger. Suddenly Gabriel darted from the room and rushed upstairs ... I was in terror what the Count might think



of him. Great was my relief when he came down in his velvet Sunday suit, and shoes and stockings. (Stenbock)

Reading with cruising in mind, the sexual implications of this scene are unavoidable. Gabriel receives an unexplained physical signal from Vardalek (the forefinger touch), and immediately leaves to make himself more attractive in his Sunday best—evidently, he correctly perceives Vardalek’s unspoken invitation. In this scene, Gabriel interprets a kindred spirit in Vardalek’s strangeness and finds meaning in his subtle yet significant touch. Moreover, the “trivial” physical exchange is witnessed by Carmela but goes unexamined; its implicit sexuality is understood only between Gabriel, Vardalek, and the reader who, like them, understands the language of homoeroticism. Touching frequently occurs between the Count and Gabriel without critical comment from Carmela: the pair walk “hand in hand” in the garden and Gabriel rushes to “kiss [Vardalek] on the mouth” (Stenbock). As with cruising, these suggestively intimate exchanges occur right at the peripheral of normative society—also like cruising, the heteronormative gaze, and, for that matter, heteronormative literary analysis, is ill-equipped to understand what it cannot or will not see.

Physical intimacies are a logical point of inquiry with textual cruising, though other forms of coded queer expression and their contributions to the story’s subtext have been fruitfully explored by Bojti (2022, 2024) and S. Brooke Cameron (2021). Bojti connects the historical influence of music on Victorian homosexual subcultures with Stenbock’s own poetic adaptations of famous homoerotic music, and further draws parallels to the music described in “True Story.” As Bojti writes, homoerotic music, namely Franz Liszt’s popular translation and touring production of Franz Schubert’s musical “Erlkönig” (1815)—itself an adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s ballad, “Der Erlkönig” (1782)—had a significant influence on Stenbock as both a creative and homosexual. Bojti argues that Stenbock was likely influenced by “Der Erlkönig” and its adaptations as evidenced by the plot similarities between the production and “True Story,” which both follow a beautiful young boy succumbing to an older man’s vampiric seductions (“The True Story of a Vampire in Context” 159–162).

To expand on Bojti’s analysis, musical talent functions in the short story as another means of subtly communicating homoerotic attraction, or even signifying queerness

generally. Indeed, Gabriel and Vardalek share a præternatural musical ability that defies regularity strongly enough to warrant commentary from Carmela:

[S]eldom could [Gabriel] be induced by Mlle Vonnaert to learn lessons; but when he did so, he learnt with extraordinary quickness. He would play upon every conceivable instrument, holding a violin here, there, and everywhere except the right place: manufacturing instruments for himself out of reeds—even sticks. Mlle Vonnaert made futile efforts to induce him to learn to play the piano. (Stenbock)

Carmela identifies an unusualness in Gabriel’s “extraordinary” abilities, though she fails to perceive the significance of this distinction. Gabriel, however, is hypnotised by Vardalek’s virtuosity on the piano, his playing described by Carmela as “wild, rhapsodic, wonderful. [It] is the music which makes men mad” (Stenbock).<sup>7</sup> As noted in the passage, Gabriel “seldomly” endured piano lessons with his female teacher, Mlle Vonnaert, a detail that contrasts with and highlights Vardalek’s welcomed accompaniment. The sexual subtext most obviously manifests in Gabriel’s “quivering” bodily reaction to Vardalek’s playing, an erotically charged response that suggests not only their musical and sexual compatibility, but that music—or, more specifically, the “extraordinary” way in which they both play—textually signifies their discrete but mutually recognised queerness. This bond is made explicit by Vardalek, who cries “Poor child! You have the soul of music within you” (Stenbock), a statement that mystifies Carmela, who expects only praise for Gabriel’s extraordinary talent. Carmela’s superficial musical reading encapsulates how queer subtext operates throughout the story: where Vardalek identifies Gabriel’s queerness through his talent and taste in *csárdás* (and thus foresees

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7 Bojti notes that Stenbock’s choice of song (a Hungarian *csárdás*) further connotes the player’s queerness: “Innumerable theorists believed at the time [of Stenbock’s writing] that certain types of music had a particular effect on homosexual men’s nervous disposition. In gay literature of the nineties ... the *style hongrois* (i.e. music of the Hungarian style) lent itself to the strategic double-coding of the narrative: the immense popularity of the genre in the nineteenth century allowed the kind of music to pass without suspicion; at the same time, it hinted at a homosexual subtext for initiated readers” (168). The *style hongrois*, then, and the “quivering” response it engenders in Gabriel, perhaps demonstrates the physical effect on homosexuals’ nervous dispositions that contemporaneous theorists believed such music could induce.

the “poor” misfortune of his inevitable decline), Carmela only sees spectacular performance without consideration for its latent tragic irony.

Thus far Gabriel and Vardalek have been analysed through the lens of literary cruising, though their connection is perhaps most strongly coloured by its fatal vampiric conclusion. Intriguingly, moments of physical intimacy between the two appear in tandem with references to Vardalek imbibing Gabriel’s essence, as suggested by the Count being physically refreshed, and Gabriel physically drained, after times they are alone together (Stenbock). Much like Le Fanu’s Carmilla, Vardalek’s vampirism is intrinsically tied to homosexual activity; certainly, their first flirtation—Vardalek fingering Gabriel’s pulse—links the vampire’s thirst to a simultaneous physical attraction. Though, unlike Laura (Carmilla’s lover/victim,) Gabriel is seemingly aware of his vampire’s predation. Why, then, would Gabriel allow himself to be drained to the point of death? Perhaps the answer is the joy and pleasure in being “seen” by another who understands, is attracted to, and reciprocates the queerness that so distinctly marks Gabriel and Vardalek as Other. In a study on homosexual subcultures, Henning Bech emphasises that cruising is, in part, a process of validation. The practice offers “its own rewards: pleasure, excitement, affirmation” (qtd. in Turner 28). This is to say that cruising has returns that extend beyond physical gratification. For Gabriel/Gabryel/Gavril, who was always a “præterhuman” cypher to his family, to be recognised and understood by this queer-identified stranger was an experience worth dying for.

Suggesting death to be Gabriel’s intent may appear extreme, but it is not without precedent. In the monograph *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (2019), Dustin Friedman outlines the literary reflection of such a grave choice: “[t]he aesthetes demonstrated that it is possible to have a radical theory of sexuality that assumes, in contrast to queer negativity, that the subject possesses a limited, yet meaningful, capacity for self-determination” (6). This radical reformation of self—what Friedman calls “erotic negativity”—allows one to test the “very limits of what is thinkable in one’s culture” (4) and envision new modes of seeing, forms of thinking, and ways of being (6). In this sense, Gabriel embracing the vampire is a wilful acceptance of his homosexuality and its pleasures—despite its persecution. Gabriel’s price for intimacy was likely known by many queer Victorian readers because his tragedy reflects the ends of notable contemporaneous homosexual figures. Stenbock personally witnessed such impacts with his friend and fellow artist Simeon Solomon, whose various arrests and convictions for “indecent exposure”

and “attempt to commit buggery” resulted in a ruinous financial penalty and eighteen-months of hard labour (Cameron 51). As Cameron notes, Solomon’s very public sexual scandals effectively ended his successful painting career, the punishment leading directly to his dependencies on alcohol and financial support from friends like Stenbock (51). With tragedies like Solomon’s in mind, Gabriel’s death becomes an allegorical reflection for the realities of living authentically as an “out” Victorian. It is not queerness that kills him, but the lethal effects of a homophobic culture. This reading gives agency to Gabriel’s choices, nuances the danger of the archetypal stranger, and reallocates the horror of Victorian queerness away from homosexuals and onto those who made secretive processes like cruising a cultural necessity.

“True Story” is an acceptance of the queer and sexual self in that Gabriel and Vardalek recognise within the other a queer kindred spirit; the two share intimate moments and, eventually Gabriel’s body and life. This fatal conclusion to their distinctly homoerotic bond raises the spectre of homosexuality’s perceived degenerative or even lethal effects within the Victorian imagination—though, I argue Gabriel’s death is not the consequence of homosexuality, but of its persecution. In this reading, Vardalek’s remark “poor child” can be read as Stenbock reflecting on his youth from the mature outlook of a homosexual who knows the slow and fatal decline of those who live queerly. To read with Carmela’s normative gaze is to lose her author’s social critique. However, applying underutilised queer perspectives, like the language of cruising, to literary and historical analysis can reveal the essential underlying dualities within this and other Decadent texts.

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ian M. Clark (he/him) is a PhD candidate in the Department of English Literature at Queen's University, Ontario. His research focuses on the intersections of gender and sexual queerness in long nineteenth-century British Gothic literature. His work has appeared in *Oxford Bibliographies*, *The Journal of Dracula Studies*, and *Revenant*, for whom he co-edited the recent special issue, "Vampires: Consuming Monsters and Monstrous Consumption" (2023). Upcoming projects include chapters on class and folk horror in *Carmilla* (1872) for Rowman & Littlefield's collection on Sheridan le Fanu and queer sadomasochism in *Dracula* (1897) for Bloomsbury Academic. Other research interests are Victorian queer history and culture, drag, and depictions of the metaphoric Other in film and television