“In ‘The Bloody Chamber’ Angela Carter reverses gothic traditions so that the males become the victims instead of the females”. Discuss

‘The Bloody Chamber’ is a collection of short stories; re-written versions of tales such as ‘Beauty and the Beast’, ‘Red Riding Hood’, and ‘Bluebeard’ as well as original stories such as ‘Wolf Alice’. This essay will discuss two of the short stories: ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ and ‘The Lady of the House of Love’, and how Angela Carter has reversed the gothic tradition of weak, submissive, female characters into strong heroines who are created by Carter to support her strong feminist views. However, the essay will also discuss the interpretations of these two stories that are not in support of a reversal of gothic traditions with women, and still show them to be subservient.

‘The Lady of the House of Love’ holds many gothic elements. Not only does it have the supernatural, displayed through the involvement of vampires, but it also includes on-going themes of despair, death, love, fate, and blood. Immediately from the beginning of the story Carter has already changed the gothic tradition; the female of the story is a vampire, who are notoriously known for being feared, bloodthirsty creatures of the night. This is shown through her being described as “birdlike” and “predatory”. The use of zoomorphism reinforces her as animalistic and dangerous, thus giving her a femme fatale personality as she now preys on the naïve young British man who has been lured to her. However, while the description of her as a bird creates an image of her as fierce, free, and wild, it also gives her a sense of delicacy and innocence. It can also have the connotation of her being trapped in her cage of eternal youth as something synthetic and unreal, as she frequently voices her desire to be human in the story.

In line with Carters feminist views, giving the female the dominant role has led to the male being in the submissive role. The vampire sees him as having the “golden light of the summer’s day”, and it is revealed that he is a virgin. The golden light may be a reference to the vampire seeing a halo around him as he, to her, is pure and clean; quite the opposite of a vampire who dwells in darkness and steals the lives and blood of others. She is also given features similar to a succubus as she uses sexual language to entice the man by saying that “my clothes have but to fall and you will see before you a succession of mysteries” and that “now she is a woman, she must have men”. Through this, Carter has given her a masculine role, in that she is in control of his innocence and virginity, and she has become his puppet master.

However, there are also aspects of the story that still show her as being submissive. Although she is a vampire, and there have been qualities revealed about her which make her seem dangerous, Carter reveals another side of her. This gets rid of the dichotomy of women. Rather than being either submissive, angelic, and good or dominant, devil-like, and evil, she has been created as a mixture. Though on the outside she seems fierce and indomitable, her inner-thoughts lead to the understanding that really she is quite frail and depressed. She shows no greed or happiness in killing. Rather than being happy the man has showed up so that she may drink his blood she instead expresses happiness over having found the one she was waiting for, as she says “I’ve been waiting for you”. She is also confined to being the traditional woman by having only ever worn her mother’s wedding dress. Yet, while this interprets her as confined to the role only as a wife, it is also a sign of breaking free from the “puppet woman” as a lone woman wearing a wedding dress can also promote her being independent; but also lonely and perhaps in need of someone. There is also another time where she is described as “birdlike” however this time it is full of more pity and sorrow as the narration says “poor night bird, poor butcher bird” which again shows that she takes no pride in killing. Also, while the initial analysis of “suivez-moi, je vous attendais, vous serez ma proie”, which means “follow me, I was expecting you, you are my prey”, is her showing her animalistic side by calling him her prey and luring him to her, her later repetition of “suivez-moi” changes the sentiment of the sentence. Instead, she sound desperate, lonely and lost, as though she needs him.

Carter also shows her weaknesses in the male’s description of her. When he looks at her, he does not see something dangerous, but “a girl-child, fatherless, motherless”. It gives the image of her as a vulnerable, frightened orphan. Yet at the same time, Carter’s feminist views are shown through the interpretation that her being without a father figure gives her more power and freedom as there is no male dominance to push her into patriarchy.

‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ and ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ are similar in terms of the characters personalities. Both Mr Lyon and the Countess are things which are typically assumed to be frightening and scary (a lion and a vampire), yet both have a gentle personality hidden beneath their physical features. Similarly, both Beauty and the Englishman are supposed to be the submissive, innocent ones yet they are revealed to be quite brave and heroic. Again, Beauty, the assumed submissive, plays a role in the dominant characters future. The Beast tells Beauty that “I am dying…since you left me”. Through this he has not only given her dominance by making her in charge of him, he has also made the statement seem accusatory. It is emphasised that the Beast is putting all of the blame for his suffering on Beauty, as the syntax makes it clear that she left him and not the other way around. Although she is a woman, in the story she is given the masculine role. Therefore, this may be Carter’s way of arguing that men constantly put the blame for suffering on women, particularly strong women, such as Beauty. This could be Carter highlighting the absurdity of a stereotypical male view that if a woman is not at home, being domestic, then she is out of her place and so will only cause havoc and destruction until she takes her “rightful” place as a patriarchal woman.

As Beauty is described straight at the beginning of the story, an image is already created of her as a sweet, kind young girl, but Carter immediately disposes of this notion by firmly telling the reader “do not think she had no will of her own”, again similar to the boy who is reassured strongly that “he is not a cat…he is a hero”. Both stories agree with Carter’s goal of “the elimination of gender differences…with men and women adopting a combination of male and female attributes” as by having both stories characters be similar in personality, yet juxtaposing in the gender role of who is dominant/submissive (In ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ it is Beauty, the girl, and in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ it is the boy) Carter has shown her desire for justice for women, and that men and women are equal; we are both strong and weak, and should be treated the same.

Again, there are also aspects of this story which show the female, Beauty, to still be weak. Examples of this are that despite being a full-grown adult now, her father still calls her “his beauty, his girl-child, his pet”, and that she is referred to as “Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial”. Both quotes reinforce male dominance, particularly through the word “pet” and the repetition of “his” to show that she is not her own person, but belongs to him. Also, the intertextuality of “girl-child”, used in both stories, implies there is a universal male idea that all women must be innocent, and must stay this way even when adults. However, the way Carter has used the word gives a sense of perversity to it; the men seem even more domineering and controlling of women and their sexuality.

In conclusion, although Carter has argued through these stories that women are stronger than man in some ways, she also acknowledges that the problem of sexism still exists today. She has used her stories as a platform for expressing this.