Women’s Sexuality In Dracula And The Bloody Chamber

‘Women’s sexuality, both conforming and transgressing, is a common feature of gothic writing.’

Compare and contrast Dracula and The Bloody Chamber in light of this statement.

The sexuality of women plays a big role within Dracula and The Bloody Chambers and female characters in both narratives display sexuality in different ways as they are either empowered by embracing this or punished from straying away from social norms and expectations of women.

Dracula and The Bloody Chambers display different aspects of gender roles and expectation as well as having conflicting ideals about marriage and innocence. Lucy is a character who questions gender roles in which she suggests "I suppose that we women are such cowards that we think a man will save us from fears, and we marry him.” The semantic field of ‘cowards’ and ‘fears’ can depict the simple idea that women run to men for protecting but underneath this notion also involves the idea that the protection they seek for is not from irrational fears but rather protection of their reputation. Lucy implies that women are cowards as they must marry men due to traditional gender roles and she questions the validity behind this. Lucy provides subtle progressive remarks in order to show how she moves away from the confinements society places on her like "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it." Lucy evaluates female independence and wonder why she cannot have the same level of freedom as men in society through this rhetorical question. This also implies that she wants to have this freedom without being ostracised. The ideal woman during the 19th century would have been titled ‘the angel of the house’ which is a title most suited towards Mina. The women are categorised according to David Gates, who claims 'Stoker's women fall into two classes, victims and survivors'. Innocence and purity is celebrated; Mina is rewarded for remaining pure, whilst Lucy is punished. Mina is depicted as more knowledgeable, whilst Lucy is punished for having more liberal ideas and has to be protected by men. However, Mina protects the men in certain aspects, but when Mina is left out of the discussions with the men, she is bitten by Dracula, suggesting that innocence of knowledge will destroy women and therefore they must be intellectually be brought into society. Marriage and innocence in The Bloody Chambers is perceived differently and is not completely about a contract a man and woman should fulfil. The heroine’s happily ever after doesn’t consist of a stereotypical marriage in which she lives in luxury, but she marries a blind man and has given away her fortune to live with her husband and mother. Towards the end the heroine goes to say that “No paint, nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead”. The “red mark” is of course a symbol of triumph over death and misogyny, she is still ashamed as it is a reminder that she allowed herself to be lured, mistreated and abused which is why by earning a living, rejecting wealth and living with her mother, she fulfils her wish for independence and as Moore says she 'avoids the institution of marriage with its requirement to love, honour, and obey a husband till death. Replaces a relationship between power and submission with one of mutual affection and equality.' With innocence, Carter wants women to be aware of their own sexuality and embrace their knowledge, rather than be punished for it, like Lucy is. In The Tiger’s Bride, we explore this notion as she 'strips herself' naked, suggesting the importance of choice in sexual liberation

as she celebrates female sexuality and the breakdown of innocence if a woman chooses to do so. We also see this in The Snow Child where Carter suggests it is dangerous to fetishize innocence and therefor corrupts the idea of the father and daughter relationship. Whilst Lucy's idea of a marriage had led to punishment, The heroine's marriage led her to a happy ever after showing that these two novels portray non stereotypical marriage, gender roles and innocence in different lights and aspects.

One common motif used within both texts is the use of blood. This motif can symbolise how blood can enable women to prosper and is a key part of female sexuality or potentially be used a sign of entrapment and loss of purity. In the Snow Child, we see a perfect depiction of male control over female identity. The Snow Child is what Cristina Bacchilega calls "A male fantasy". He wishes that he has "A girl as red as blood" and this simile perfectly describes the dangers of male desire with 'red' being a symbol of lust whilst 'blood' identifying the dangers come with it. He also describes her as having "White skin, red mouth, black hair" which can be seen as intertextual to Snow White and emphasises the change from an innocent girl to a seductive temptress. The Count sees the Snow Child as "The Child of Desire" indicating that he sees her as a product of his physical desires and only values her as a sexual object. When the Snow Child dies, she leaves behind a rose, a feather, and a bloodstain. The small number of objects she amounts to show how unrealistic this ideal is and only exists as a product of The Counts libido. When the rose pricks her, The Snow Child transforms into a woman with the bleeding symbolising menstruation. Once she fulfils her requirement of being a sexual object, she dies as she is no longer needed and is why The Count "Thrusts his virile member into the dead girl". The graphic imagery indicating acts of necrophilia demonstrates the ability of male domination even after death which can also be seen in The Bloody Chambers with the Marquis and his dead wives. The point is further portrayed when the stain is described through the simile "A bloodstain, like a trace of foxes kill on the snow" showing very animalistic traits within male desire and reinforces the picture of how a predator has devoured its prey. In The Tigers Bride, her father asks her to give her a white rose as a sign of forgiveness: "When I break off a stem, I prick my finger and so he gets his rose all smeared with blood." The idea of having a "rose all smeared in blood" can be representative of many things. One being that it can represent her loss of virginity and being transformed from a figure of purity to one of lust. Another being the idea that white can represent the idea of letting go, if this is tainted in blood it shows how she does not fully forgive her father. Here we see blood being used to show how she breaks out of her passive role and stand up to her father who was once a character who owned her. Blood, due to its ability to be transfused between humans, can be seen as a currency in the Gothic text as we seen in Dracula. In this text, blood is used as a metaphor to describe the loss of virginity and sexually transmitted diseases which were feared during 1897. However, blood also enables Lucy to be liberated from the stereotypical female role and allows her to embrace her sexuality. Blood can represent power in the book. When Lucy has turned into a vampire, she sucks the blood of children. Van Helsing talks about how in this way she gains power over the children: "Those children whose blood she suck are not as yet so much the worse; but if she live on, Un-Dead, more and more they lose their blood and by her power over them they come to her; and so she draw their blood with that so wicked mouth." The imagery of the "wicked mouth" illustrates to readers that her expressive sexuality is demonised but also helps her gain power. In a similar way, when Count Dracula was drinking Lucy's and Mina's blood, he gained power over them as well. Dr. Seward recounts his worry about Count Dracula's influence over Mina: "If I thought that the Count's power over her would die away equally with her power of knowledge it would be a happy thought; but I am afraid that it may not b'so." The idea of her "power of knowledge" can be seen as progressive as women were seen as more nurturing which can

further be examined by Van Helsing comment of how Mina “has man's brain - a brain that a man should have were he much gifted - and woman's heart." Further illustrating how men were intellectual whilst women were gentle and caring. This demonstrated how Mina had a unique gift: Their minds became connected and she could see his thoughts and actions such that she could lead the vampire killers to where Count Dracula was hiding. Overall, both texts portray the idea of blood signifying the idea of transformation but also the conflicting ideas of whether it resembles power or submission to male superiority.

The use of pornographic language in both texts are used in different ways to start the conversation about the male gaze. In Dracula, Stoker had written every scene within a sexual light, viewed from a man's perspective which can reinforce the male gaze and reflects the fear of female sexuality. After Lucy’s transformation, we see her becoming sexually liberated: "She still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said: -- 'Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!' ". Being described using the adjectives ‘languorous, voluptuous grace’ is demonstrative of how male society have started to view her as a sensuous character and persona. The metaphor ‘My arms are hungry for you’ even further demonstrates the desires she can now openly express. Although becoming a vampire releases Lucy’s confinement from society, she is still a feared creature or as David Gates states, 'Lucy is an inversion of the modest and virtuous Victorian woman; she becomes sexually aggressive and anti-maternal’. Her sexual liberation comes at a great cost as she becomes an outcast and she loses all of the qualities that once made her a desirable Victorian woman. She is treated like a monster who must be snuffed out because she threatens society's expectations of women. Other characters like the Weird Sisters, referencing the three witches from Macbeth, could be used as a literary device to portray the idea of the fallen woman. They are overtly sexual beings with their “Brilliant white teeth” and “Voluptuous lips” and Harker describes his experience with them as “…a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive'. The idea of being both “Thrilling and repulsive” shows how women being sexually open is something that’s only beneficial to men rather than the rest of society. David Gates describe these vampires as ‘…associated with sexuality and the liberation of unconscious desires' This brings in the idea of The New Woman as viewed from within a Victorian context, Harker is portrayed in a somewhat feminized position, with the gender roles reversed, in that he is a man being seduced by women, when in nineteenth-century society men would be expected to assume the role of seducer. In the Bloody Chambers however, Carter reclaims the 'male gaze' by talking through a female voice and reclaims the word for a woman's sexual reproductive organs; she does not hint at any sexual reference she is very literal. She starts to find joy in her newly found sexual awareness, which Carter brings to life with vivid words such as, '…the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.' The noun 'bore' compares the heroine's journey to her married life to a rebirth. The comparison explains how the heroine is being transformed from a girl, 'away from girlhood' into a woman. Using sexual verbs like 'pounding,' 'thrusting' and 'burning' describes her arousal and curiosity at the act of sex that she anticipates. Even though the Marquis evaluates her as though she is 'horseflesh,' his condescension excites her because it makes her realize her own potential for corruption, for sexuality and desire. Overall, In Dracula, there is barely any female holding power, thus enforcing the patriarchy and the fears of overt female sexuality whereas in The Bloody Chambers, the language liberates women as it presents them as sexual beings, not just for childbirth. This helps them to break free from the submissive roles that are enforced upon them

in Dracula as women gain much greater agency through the pornographic imagery and language throughout the novel.

Another common motif used amongst both texts is mirrors which is used to illustrate reality, what belongs to this world as well as freedom and realisation. In The Tigers Bride, the mirror reflects the father's ownership of his daughter. After she sees the truth about men, represented primarily by her father, the girl realises she has changed. When she looks in the mirror, she sees 'a pale hollow-eyed girl whom I scarcely recognized' and compares herself to the painted doll automaton 'whose face was no longer the spit of my own'. Her lack of recognition of her own self shows how she went through a transformation in which she is more aware of her label as a woman. She also references the feminist ideology of the male gaze through using imagery of the distant eyes of an automaton: 'the marketplace, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence'. This suggests that the gaze is a manufactured and unnatural response in men, not a defining characteristic. Although the mirror reflects male superiority over women, It also is representative of how it enables her to liberate herself and realise that she was simply an object to her father which allows her to transform into a liberated woman. Reflective the Male Gaze; in 'The Bloody Chamber', the mirrors enable the Marquis to objectify the narrator into nothing but a pornographic image. The heroine is aroused by being objectified potentially as it enables her to not just be seen for childbirth. Therefore, she feels liberated from the constraining roles of either being a mother of a wife as she is 'reborn in his unreflective eyes'. This suggests that the male gaze can be liberating, but only if the woman is seen as equal and not subjected to being seen as just an object. Women need to see themselves as sexually liberated, not just a sexual object. In Dracula, the mirror can be represented through many different objects and characters, but project similar views presented in The Tiger's Bride. In Dracula, we see how Harker becomes startled when he sees no reflection of Dracula in the mirror: "'Good morning.' I started, for it amazed me that I had not seen him, since the reflection of the glass covered the whole room behind me." Dracula cannot be seen in mirrors and has no reflection potentially to display how he does not belong in this world and cannot progress in modern society yet; he continues to infect it. Jonathan confirms that he did not see a reflection when he says "But there was no reflection of him in the mirror! The whole room behind me was displayed, but there was no sign of a man in it, except myself." The exclamatory "But there was no reflection of him in the mirror!" elaborates how inhumane Dracula is which is reinforced with the lie "There was no sign of a man in it". Although Dracula cannot be seen in mirrors, he can be seen as a mirror himself. Much like mirrors in The Bloody Chamber we see how they enable women to liberate themselves, Dracula allows women to be sexually liberated so he acts as a mirror for a liberated human that was not allowed to prosper in Victorian Britain. However, Dracula is destroyed at the end which illustrates the inability for society to be liberated, due to the fear of uncontrollable desires and female liberation in society as the 'New Woman' came to the forefront of society and the novel itself reflects societies anxieties and fears. Mirrors in both texts revolve around the conflicting ideas of objectification and liberation and how women need to take control of their sexual freedom although it may be looked down upon within society.

To conclude, Dracula and Carter share similar and conflicting views in regard to female sexuality. Whether it is illustrating graphic images of sexuality and sexual deviancy or if it portrays characters who are initially confined by social norms and tend to break away from them, both texts explore the idea of sexual liberation and whether this power for complete freedom relies on men or how women should be able to take complete control over their own selves.