“Not exactly as a boy”

A Study of Queer Gender Performances, Cross-dressing, and Love Between Women in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*

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Abstract

This study consists of an analysis of the novel *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters, in terms of cross-dressing as self-representation. The study aims to emphasise how cross-dressing can be significant when expressing one’s gender identity, by examining the gender identity and sexual orientation of the male impersonator Nancy Astley/Nan King and how she reacts to her own queerness. With the use of queer literary theory, Judith Butler’s theories on gender performativity, and ideas of gender as social constructs, this study argues that the novel is a powerful representation of the fluidity and inconsistency of gender and the non-existence of the gender binary. Throughout the novel, the main character disrupts the expected gender roles of the British Victorian era, and through the use of cross-dressing, uses masculinity and masculine femininity to discover and express her gender identity.
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Introduction

This study consists of a queer reading of *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters, focusing on the depiction of lesbianism and same-sex attraction, gender performance and cross-dressing, and how the characters of the novel react to these themes.

Set during the 1890s, *Tipping the Velvet* follows the young working-class woman Nancy, her infatuation with a male impersonator, her self-discovery in terms of sexuality, and her observations on sexism, class differences and gender issues in Victorian London. As Nancy explores the exuberant world of the music hall scene and her turbulent love affair with the male impersonator, her life takes unexpected turns and Nancy realises that she needs to take various precautions to support herself as a young lesbian in a cruel city. Sarah Waters’ debut novel was met with critical acclaim when it was published in 1998, and has since then been included on several lists of influential LGBT fiction and Waters is considered by many to be one of the greatest authors in the lesbian literary canon.

To execute the study, queer theory and elements of gender studies are used to analyse the aspects of gender and sexuality in the novel. Claims and ideas by queer theorist Judith Butler are used in relation to the themes of the novel in order to demonstrate in what way it represents the social construction of gender and instances of the performance of gender as self-representation. As the main character uses male attire to explore her gender identity and sexuality, both on and off stage, cross-dressing serves as an important theme of the novel. Since cross-dressing commonly occurred in Victorian theatre, a comparative study of the Elizabethan and the Victorian use of theatrical cross-dressing is carried out to present the similarities between the two periods’ view on cross-dressing and how supports Butler’s theories on the performance of gender. Furthermore, Butler’s ideas entwine with Michel Foucault’s theories of sexual repression and power relations. Hence, their theories will act as essential foundations when examining the relationship between the main character of *Tipping the Velvet* and the older, authoritative woman she becomes acquainted, and eventually sexually involved, with, as the story progresses. Additionally, Foucault’s and transgender theorist Riki Wilchins’ arguments for creating an available space for non-conforming sexual identities are also discussed and applied to the analysis of the novel.

As Butler’s theory of three different aspects of gender identity is considered, I also attempt to expand her theory by discussing whether there is a possibility to include a fourth aspect, in terms of sexual identity. A historical investigation is carried out to establish the social
situation of queer women in the Victorian era, examining how tolerated romantic and/or sexual relations between women were. Furthermore, while the social and political situation for queer people in Western society has improved since the end of the nineteenth century, issues of alienation, identity, belonging remain and are still experienced by people of the queer community. Since these issues are recurring throughout the novel and experienced by the main character, as she challenges norms and gender roles, I argue for the applicability of contemporary perspectives and relevance of modern analysis on the chosen literary work. Moreover, an analysis of the queer elements of the novel is presented, examining how the issues of gender performance are depicted by the author, how the main character’s lesbianism and same-sex relationships are depicted and finally, how important the role of cross-dressing is in terms of the main character’s sexual orientation and gender identity.

From a queer perspective, gender performance and cross-dressing play a distinct role in understanding the representation of socially constructed gender roles, as well as the depiction of same-sex relations, in *Tipping the Velvet*. 
Theories of Gender and Cross-dressing

In this study, queer theory is the literary theory that is the most relevant theory to use in order to examine and understand the relation between the character and her beloved, their use of cross-dressing in theatrical acts, and the performance of gender roles. In her introductory book on queer theory, Nikki Sullivan quotes queer theorist David Halperin, who discusses the word queer in his book Saint Foucault. Halperin claims that:

> Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers [...] [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose premise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimit ed in advance. (Sullivan 43)

As Halperin’s definition applies to the general meaning of the word queer, it does not apply to the word when discussing queer as a literary theory. Sullivan argues that queer, both as an identity and as a theory, is “constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that have the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan 43-44). This claim perfectly summarizes the significance of the word queer itself, as well as denotes a wide range of sexual identities of marginalised people (e.g. gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, drag queens etc.) into a universal word.

However, the use of the word has historically been met with criticism. Queer theory and queer politics have been accused of repeating the exclusionary logic often associated with second-wave feminism, and of being “male-centred, anti-feminist, and race-blind” (Sullivan 48). Sullivan recalls a statement made by scholar Isling Mack-Nataf, in which she expressed criticism directed towards the use of the word: “I’m more inclined of using the words ‘black lesbian’ because when I hear the word ‘queer’, I think of white, gay men” (Sullivan 48). It is possible to suggest that queer politics occasionally inform a simplistic distinction of who is authorised to identify themselves as queer, and who is not granted that permission. Thus, heterosexuals are dominantly positioned in narratives, “whereas all queers are marginalised and consciously and intentionally resist assimilation of any kind” (Sullivan 48-49).

Furthermore, Annamarie Jagose claims that queer as a critical theory “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” and tries to “[locate] and [exploit] the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality” (Jagose 3). Her argument illustrates the possibility of the non-existence of ‘natural’ sexualities, a possibility which she then argues “calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and
‘woman’” (Jagose 3). It can be suggested that queer theory rebuke the existence of stable sexualities and gender identities, such as heterosexuality and the norm-conforming identities of man and woman. Hence, the reworking of lesbian and gay identities, as argued by Jagose, results in the development of queer as a “constellation of multiple, unstable positions” (Jagose 3).

As a queer approach on literature, lesbian/gay studies “does for sex and sexuality what women’s studies does for gender”, making sexual orientation “a fundamental category of analysis and understanding” (Abelove et al., xv). This means that lesbian/gay studies bear both political and social aims since it is “informed by the social struggle for the sexual liberation” as well as the “resistance to homophobia and heterosexism” (Abelove et al., xvi). Jeffrey Weeks argues that the object of lesbian/gay studies of queer literary works have often been the object of lesbian and gay lives, the objects being “identities, experiences of oppression, struggles for recognition, through history and in literature” (Sandfort et al., 2). Lesbian literary studies in particular has been a victim of complex development throughout the past decades, defined by the sexualisation of lesbian bodies and the fragmentation and contradiction of lesbian identities, while the lesbian literary canon has expanded (Sandfort et al., 155). Hence, with the help of queer theory, the reader is given narratological tools to redefine and develop the queer literary canon. One could suggest that a queer reading of characters and narratives is essential in the reconstruction of the queer literary canon. Challenging the reader to expose and criticise the norms of heterosexuality in a literary work could supposedly help expanding the queer literary canon.

Queer theorist Judith Butler’s ideas on gender performativity and gender as social constructs will be applied to the analysis of the key characters of the novel. Butler argues that all identities related to gender or sexuality, are “a kind of imitation for which there is no original”, that gender imitates “the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (Inside/Out 21). This claim suggests that the notion of gender identity is not a fixed matter, but it is constantly fluid and changeable. Thus, Butler’s ideas of gender as social constructs and the non-existence of the gender binary can be linked to Riki Wilchins’ theories of gender. In her book Queer Theory, Gender Theory, Wilchins emphasises the notion of gender identities as parts of a non-binary, evolving spectrum. She argues that the gender binary (which polarises attributes and characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity) features binary opposites through which one can distinguish feeling like ‘a real man’ only to the exact degree that one does not feel like ‘a real woman’ and vice versa. Physical
appearances that confirm a man to be male (masculinity) and a woman to be female (femininity) create a sense of inability for gender to evolve since people who fall under these definitions confirm and conform to how ‘men’ and ‘women’ are expected to appear. When these expectations are challenged, when masculine femininity and feminine masculinity, or even an identity completely unknown to the binary, appears, these identities are interpreted as a ‘gendered failure’ (Wilchins 134). Thus, when the gender binary becomes deranged and new gender identities evolve and develop, they are perceived, by people who fit into the gender binary, as outside the traditional gender roles. A person challenging the norms of the gender binary may experience gender dysphoria, an inner conflict caused by the inability to relate to and identify with their physical or assigned gender, and the societal perception of traditional masculine and feminine gender roles. Whereas gender dysphoria refers to the personal distress and inner perception of failing to live up to the expectations of gender, ‘gendered failure’ is the outside, societal interpretation of gender dysphoria.

Moreover, Butler also argues that in the binary of masculinity and femininity, is it particularly the ‘feminine’ that is decontextualized and analytically and politically separated from constitutions such as class, race, and ethnicity (Gender Trouble 6). Butler identifies these three components as axes of power relations which create an identity and “make the singular notion of identity a misnomer” (Gender Trouble 6). Hence, this claim can be linked to Michel Foucault’s view on power relations. According to Foucault, power is exercised in the interplay of inequality between individuals and mobile relations, rather than “something that is acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 94) and thus, power relations are “immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums” which occur in other types of relationships, e.g. sexual relations, since they have directly productive roles (Foucault 94). Thus, it could be suggested that the joining of Butler’s and Foucault’s claims supports the idea that social stratification such as class and race are components which grant power to privileged individuals and reduce or completely eliminate the amount of power to people of colour and lower classes. As supported by Foucault’s theory, class and race are contributing factors in the creation of power structures, which ultimately result in authoritative superiors and oppressed inferiors.

Furthermore, transgender theorist Riki Wilchins argues that the institutionalisation of sexualities forced individuals to manage their sexualities and behaviour in the private sphere, which allowed the central institutions, such as the church and the state, to inflict invasive power over these individuals (Wilchins 52). The already marginalised, sexually ‘abnormal’ people and those with norm-challenging identities, were “deemed deviants and in need of treatment” and
were placed in mental institutions where their sexual identities would be tolerated (Wilchins 53). In addition to Wilchins’ theories, Michel Foucault’s theories on Victorian sexual repression can be taken into consideration. In the first volume of his extensive study of human sexuality, Foucault addresses the sexual repression which had emerged during the Victorian era, as well as the structures of power which become established in a relationship between two individuals. In *The Will To Knowledge*, Foucault argues that it was, in a Victorian society, necessary to create a certain room for illegitimate sexualities, a place for people to relieve their “infernal mischief where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuit of production, at least in those of profit” (Foucault 4). He suggests that places such as the brothel and the mental institution were examples of places where sexual deviation was tolerated, where “the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysterics…seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted” (Foucault 4). Furthermore, he argues that only in these places do untrammelled sex and sexualities have “a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality” (Foucault 4-5), meaning that unconventional sex (i.e. non-heterosexual activities) in puritan Victorian public spaces was considered taboo, non-existent, and silenced. This would suggest that Victorians repressed sexualities they considered to be non-conforming to societal norms and, as Foucault argues, the Victorians denied the existence of such sexualities when evidence proved that they did, in fact, exist (Foucault 4).

As a part of gender performance, Butler includes the theatrical act of performing in drag. She claims that if we view a true gender as a fantasy that has been established on the surface of a body, gender is thus only produced as reactions of a discourse of primary and stable identity (*Gender Trouble* 186). Butler’s view on drag can be linked to Esther Newton, who identifies drag as:

> A double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says, “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolises the opposite inversion: “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.”

(Newton 103)

Butler also suggests that an *original or primary* gender identity often is the victim of parody in the cultural context of recreating and redefining gender roles and identities, such as “drag, cross-
dressing and the sexual stylisation of butch/femme identities” (Gender Trouble 187). She argues for an idea of three different layers of gender expression, as well as the difference between anatomical sex (the biological characteristics of a person’s genitalia) and gender. As recognised by Butler, three various layers of gender are produced and represented as a drag performer acts on stage: the biological sex of the performer, their gender identity, and their performed gender (Gender Trouble 187). Thus, is it possible to argue that if the biological sex of the performer is different from their gender, and both the sex and the gender have been distinct from the gender of the performance, “then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (Gender Trouble 187). This argument strengthens Butler’s previous claim in which she suggests that all gender is an imitation of an original that does not exist. Instead, when imitating and performing gender, the act and/or the performer reveals the fabricated structure of gender as a social construct. Butler’s idea of the three layers of gender is a theory which I apply and develop when analysing the novel.

Additionally, it is also possible to develop Butler’s theory by presenting a fourth layer of gender expression: the sexual identity of the performer. As mentioned, Butler argues that three layers of gender expressions are produced when a performer cross-dresses in a theatrical act: the person’s biological sex, their gender identity, and the gender that they are performing (Gender Trouble 187). By considering the sexual identity of the performer, it could allow us, the observers, to gain an understanding of the dynamics of gender identity, sexual identity and the expressions of the two. Arguably, a queer person’s sexuality is such an essential part of their identity as a whole that it is unmistakably necessary to consider the performer’s sexuality when studying their act of gender performance. Certainly, there is no way of knowing a person’s sexual identity by just observing them. However, if we allow ourselves to broaden our minds in regards of how we perceive sexual identities, as well as challenge the heteronormative mentality that society has so relentlessly forced upon us, we might be able to redefine the significance of sexuality as a whole. As the performer explores and challenges the boundaries of gendered norms, one could argue that they, simultaneously, challenge the audience perception of sexuality. The boundaries of sexual attraction might also be challenged, as cross-

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1 Drag/cross-dressing: “clothing typical of one sex worn by a person of the opposite sex” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
Butch: “notably or deliberately masculine in appearance or manner” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
Femme: “a lesbian who is notably or stereotypically feminine in appearance and manner” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
dressing has historically been used to appeal to men and women alike (Davis 228). This notion suggests that some performers may use theatrical cross-dressing to attract people, disregarding of their gender. Hence, to consider the sexual identity of the performer when studying their act of gender performance can be useful in order to fully comprehend their queer expressions of gender and sexual identity.

Gender performance and cross-dressing for theatrical purposes are two important themes in *Tipping the Velvet*, as the main character becomes involved in a theatrical act which requires her to cross-dress and perform on stage as a male impersonator. To gain understanding of the historical context of gender performance, an examination of the similarities between Elizabethan and Victorian cross-dressing as a theatrical device is carried out since it has bearing on the analysis that is presented later in the essay. The concept of cross-dressing in theatrical acts may not have been of a jolting nature since it has been used as a theatrical device from the days of Shakespeare, as women were not permitted to perform on the Elizabethan stage. Thus, cross-dressing by male actors was an evitable and essential practice in order to portray the female characters in a play. As Jim Davis recognises, the concept of male impersonation, i.e. female actors cross-dressing as men in a theatrical act, occurred during the Victorian era, and the role of ‘The Boy’ was, as mentioned, used “to appeal to both men and women” (Davis 228). The androgynous character, often referred to as the ‘Principal Boy’, was embodied by a female actor who, through cross-dressing, blurred the lines on the binary spectrum:

[... ] a woman enacting a certain form of masculinity, a performance that in effect proves that a woman can be ‘more like a man’, but that masculinity can also contain a sort of feminized charm. (Davis 220)

As argued by Anne Russell, the gender boundaries of masculinity and femininity that were established as a result of actors cross-dressing were met with criticism from performer as well as character, and “if the women who performed the roles of tragic heroes represented femininity and masculinity as performative roles rather than essential states”, critics often avoided to acknowledge this notion (Russell 136). This would suggest that the use of cross-dressing performers in Shakespearean plays on the Victorian stage was, indeed, used as an intentional tool of narrative in order to challenge the gender boundaries that separated masculinity from femininity. However, productions that include a cross-dressing male actor who portrays a woman who, in turn, *cross-dresses as a man*, may have challenged the audience’s expectation of gender. By allowing a female character to cross-dress, she would be granted permission to exist and act on the same terms as her male counterparts. It can be argued that the idea that a
woman could be given this opportunity may have been shocking since it challenged the morals
and values of the time. In the Shakespearean play *Twelfth Night*, female-to-male cross-dressing
occurs as the character Viola dresses in both male and female apparel: as herself and when
disguising herself and takes on the identity of a man, Cesario. In this case, the use of cross-
dressing creates a two-layered expression of gender, since Viola cross-dresses in the play itself,
and since the male actor playing the role of Viola is cross-dressing as he portrays her in the
theatrical interpretation of the play. Likewise, Judith Butler’s theory of the three layers of
gender can be used when studying Elizabethan theatrical productions, as it is arguably possible
to point out the occurrence of the three layers of gender identity in the play. According to
Butler’s theory, the biological sex of the performer, the gender identity of the performer, and
the gender that is being performed are factors that are taken into consideration when examining
a theatrical act in which the actor cross-dresses. The actor playing the role of Viola must, as he
cross-dresses, act as a love interest to the character of Olivia, thinking that Viola is, in fact, a
man. In turn, the character of Olivia is also portrayed by a cross-dressing male actor and must
then act infatuated with another cross-dressing male actor, who cross-dresses both as his
character, as well as the character cross-dresses as a man.

Hence, similarities can be found between Butler’s theories on the performance of gender
and the theories of Jean E. Howard, who argues that “the blurring of sexual differences opens
the liberating possibility of undoing all the structures of domination and exploitation premised
on binary sexual oppositions” (Howard 430). This suggests that the blurring of gender
boundaries in *Twelfth Night* signifies that the established structures of societal gender roles are
challenged, as the identity of a cross-dressing, sexually indeterminate woman is projected onto
a stage in “the male trajectory of identity” (Howard 431). Furthermore, Howard emphasises the
Elizabethan medical discourse on gender, stressing that masculine and feminine identities were
placed on the opposite sides of a continuum, and the idea of two genders was essential in
providing “a key element in its hierarchal view of the social order to buttress its gendered
division of labour” (Howard 423). The discourse also pointed at the view of the existence of
only one sex and that this sex could be found in both men and women (Howard 423). The idea
was that the human sex consisted of male genitalia and that the woman’s sexual organs were an
inverted version, thus being “like a man’s just not ‘pushed outside’ of the body” (Gorman 31).
Likewise, as paraphrased by Sara E. Gorman, Stephen Greenblatt recognises that it was
understood that women and female genitalia were “inverted mirror images of men in their very
genital structure” (Greenblatt 92). In addition, Howard claims that the gender differences during
the Renaissance did not necessarily have to be “built upon a self-evident notion of biological sexual difference as was to be true in the nineteenth-century” (Howard 423). This suggests that although the Victorian view on biological differences between the sexes differed from the Elizabethan notion of gender, women were still considered inferior to their male counterparts, whereas the male form was considered superior and infallible. Hence, studying the similarities between Elizabethan and Victorian cross-dressing is beneficial in order to understand cross-dressing for theatrical purposes, as the Victorian view on women and gender can be traced back to the Renaissance, as suggested by Howard.

In conclusion, a historical examination of cross-dressing for theatrical purposes have bearing on the analysis of *Tipping the Velvet*, since it allows the reader to consider the significance of cross-dressing when analysing the main character’s self-identification and exploration of her gender identity. With the support of Butler’s theories on gender performance and theories on the gender binary, investigating gender roles and cross-dressing in the Victorian era prove importance in understanding the themes of gender expressions depicted in the novel.
The Queerness of Nancy Astley

Nancy’s first encounter with Kitty Butler occurs when she visits the local theatre where the male impersonator performs in a female-to-male cross-dressing act. Immediately infatuated with the masculine appearance of the actress, Nancy describes Kitty as follows:

She wore a suit – a handsome gentleman’s suit…and on her head there was a topper. When she took the topper off…one saw that her hair was perfectly cropped. …She looked, I suppose, like a very pretty boy… her figure too was boy-like and slender…she strode like a boy, and stood like one, with her feet far apart… (Waters 12-13)

Evidently, Nancy experiences immediate attraction towards Kitty and her masculine characteristics. The binary of masculine and feminine attributes becomes challenged, the lines between male and female have become blurred, and Nancy experiences great confusion regarding her infatuation with a member of the same sex. As mentioned before, Riki Wilchins argues in favour of a theory that dismantles the idea that ‘male’ needs to align with ‘masculine’, and ‘female’ with ‘feminine’. This theory can be applied on the examination of Nancy’s same-sex attraction to the cross-dressed Kitty, as she finds herself drawn to the masculine attributes of the other woman. Additionally, this revelation of desire is new to Nancy, as she encounters her first experience of same-sex attraction when she becomes acquainted with Kitty. The excessive obsession with the male impersonator results in several visits to the theatre, in hopes of becoming noticed by Kitty. As a part of Kitty’s on-stage persona, she sings ballads which are traditionally narrated from a male perspective (Waters 13), with the act ending in her throwing a rose in the lap of the prettiest girl in the audience. This expression of public same-sex affection is discussed by Sarah Gamble in her article ‘“You cannot impersonate what you are”: Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel’. She argues that the reason why this display of affection is permitted is that “it is being performed in the context of a music-hall act and is thus assumed to be simulated rather than actual” (Gamble 134). However, although Nancy finds herself infatuated with Kitty, it is important to consider that her attraction is founded in the male attributes of the male impersonator, not by her feminine appearance. As she experiences sexual desire for the first time, confusion stirs within Nancy for several reasons. Firstly, her attraction towards Kitty is caused mainly by an unconventional factor: she is a woman as well. Secondly, her attraction is caused by the masculinity which Kitty embodies and thirdly, Nancy’s object of desire is not only a woman but a woman who impersonates a man. The disturbance of gender can be traced back to Butler’s theory of gender being “imitations to
which there is no original” (Barry 139), as Nancy watches Kitty perform. The different layers of gender that are being produced creates a sort of gender trouble for Nancy, who starts to question her own sexual identity upon her first introduction to Kitty.

Furthermore, it appears as though Nancy’s family do not question the overwhelming obsession their daughter and sister has developed towards the male impersonator, as they do not perceive Kitty as a female object of attraction and desire. Rachel Wood argues that the performance of a male impersonator permitted the actor to cross-dress as “she parodied masculinity as well as allowing women in the audience the playful fantasy of appropriating masculine freedoms” and allowed the women witnessing the performance “an imitation of heterosexual desire and love to take place between women” (Wood 307). Thus, the boundaries between heterosexual attraction and lesbian desire are challenged when Nancy watches Kitty perform as a man, and it allows her to act on her sexual instincts and fantasies since she perceives Kitty’s on-stage persona as not entirely female.

To the reader, it is evident that Nancy has developed romantic feelings towards Kitty as a woman. However, Nancy’s family only seem to recognise the male persona and the masculine attributes that Kitty has adopted, and seem unaware of the fact that Nancy has fallen for the woman behind the disguise. Thus, they accept her attraction and adoration, because they believe that is based on the male persona that is being performed by Kitty, not on Kitty herself. Kitty’s theatrical act allows Nancy to experience feelings of desire as if the masculine charade allows and accepts female-female attraction.

According to Butler’s claim about drag and performing gender as a theatrical act, the dissonance between sex, gender, and performance creates three varieties when expressing gender. These three layers of gender identity do not necessarily need to align, but in the context of this essay, they all play distinct roles in the examination of the gender identity of both Kitty and Nancy. It becomes evident that the women’s on-stage performances as men play upon their private femme/butch personas, which will be touched upon later in the novel. However, the femininity that is performed off-stage is also a substantial factor in the examination of the women’s identities. In Kitty’s case, her sex, her gender identity, and the gender identity she performs do not align, as she appears seemingly masculine on-stage, but is conventionally more feminine outside the theatre. Regarding Nancy’s layers of gender identity, it can be determined that before she became acquainted with Kitty and the theatre world, she is perceived as the traditional feminine girl who feels the pressure of marrying and helping her parents with the family business. When she meets Kitty, however, her eyes are opened to a new world of
possibilities and her gender identity slowly develops. When she joins Kitty in her act and starts cross-dressing herself, her gender identity and performed gender starts to increasingly align. The female-to-male cross-dressing provides insight into Nan’s link between the disavowal of her feminine gender identity and the sexual gratification she experiences when she participates in the cross-dressing act alongside her partner, as emphasised by Waters (Koolen 380). As the novel progresses, Nancy’s gender identity begins to become more fluid, as she starts working as a prostitute, cross-dressing as a prostitute, cross-dressing as a young man.

As mentioned earlier, Judith Butler argues for the existence of the three-layered notion of gender identity, which occurs when a person cross-dresses and performs in a theatrical act. As a part of the act, three different layers are produced: the anatomical sex of the performer, their gender identity, and their performed gender (Gender Trouble 187). This applies to the theatrical acts in which Kitty, and later Nan too, appear. They challenge the gender binary not only by dressing up as men but also by acting as men in their acts. Their gender identities are not traditionally female, as they toy with the gender roles of the contemporary age. Although it is not stated whether Nancy or Kitty identify as anything other than biologically female, it is possible to distinguish their gender identities as non-conforming with the genders that is expected of them. Regarding Butler’s theory, it is possible to discuss it further and introduce a fourth aspect: the sexual identity of the performer. When Nancy and Kitty perform on stage, a certain sexually tensed dynamic is established between them as they challenge the gender binary. It is evident that the women are drawn to and attracted by the masculine appearance and behaviour of each other, and the sexually charged energies that arise on stage are eventually acknowledged by the women, as they enter an intimate relationship. Considering the sexual identity of the characters, Nancy’s and Kitty’s sexualities can be interpreted differently. As soon as we as readers are introduced to Nancy, her non-existent attraction towards male suitors is noticeable, particularly towards Fred, a family friend. Instead, Kitty becomes the subject of Nancy’s first experience of romantic and sexual attraction, whereas Kitty has had experiences with female lovers before meeting Nancy (Waters 107). Since Nancy’s sexual identity serves as a significant part of her identity as a whole, it is possible to consider her sexuality as something she strives to share with her audience. By challenging the traditional roles of masculinity and femininity, Nancy also challenges her audience’s expectations and perceptions of gender and sexuality. As claimed by Davis, cross-dressing was used to be sexually appealing to both men and women (Davis 228). Thus, Nancy embraces the use of theatrical cross-dressing not only to explore her gender identity, but to seek sexual attention from the audience.
Nevertheless, this is how Kitty sparked Nancy’s sexual awakening when they first became acquainted.

Eventually, as Nancy becomes a part of Kitty’s drag act, she changes her name from ‘Nancy Astley’ to ‘Nan King’, a new last name which can be seen as referring to the modern term for a male impersonator (‘drag king’). However, it is important to bear in mind that the novel is a twentieth-century reflection of Victorian society, thus representing it from the perspective of modern-day values, rather than a Victorian depiction of Victorian society. Thus, it would not be possible for Nan to know the meaning of ‘drag king’, as a reference to male impersonation, as we know it. Mandy Koolen argues that Waters’ use of this rhetorical tool encourages “readers to adopt double reading practices by considering what [the novel] has to say about the past and how it speaks to issues that are of concern today” (Koolen 375). To expand further on the meaning of her new name, by making her first name more gender neutral, and adding an evidently more male-sounding last name, Nan’s new identity is starting to conform even more to the version of herself that we are presented to in the remainder of the novel. After her first performance with Kitty, Nan expresses the feeling of transformation, as if she has discovered her true self: “Whatever success I might achieve as a girl…would be nothing compared to the triumphs I should enjoy clad…as a boy” (Waters 123). As mentioned before, cross-dressing women were granted power and independence which allowed her to move around more freely and undisturbed. Embracing a masculine identity, Nan experiences freedom and independence in ways she has not been accustomed to until she started to cross-dress, assets she was not granted when living up to the expectations of female gender roles. Dressing and living as a man she is now able to exist, behave, and travel as she pleases without the risk of being questioned.

The feeling of transformation and inner change proves a disturbance in the gender binary, which is so often assumed by society. As a part of her transformation, Nan cuts her hair and begins to cross-dress off stage as well, implying that she is starting to grow more and more into a masculine identity, in order to cope with her gender dysphoria. In her essay “The ‘I’ inside ‘her’”, Emily Jeremiah identifies the source of Nan’s gender trouble and the ‘queerness’ of her appearance: that her costume is “too real” (Waters 118) and that she looks “too much like a boy, and not enough like a girl dressed up as a boy” (Jeremiah 136). Jeremiah continues by relating Nan’s ‘gender-bending’ to Butler’s views on drag. Butler argues that:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency…In the part of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see
sex and gender denaturalised by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. 

(Gender Trouble 187-188)

Jeremiah argues that this performance of gender “give rise to ‘pleasure’ and ‘giddiness’” (Jeremiah 137) but in Nan’s case, the ‘radical contingency of gender’, which Butler refers to, “is not exposed – she simply looks like a boy” (Jeremiah 137). This approach challenges the belief of boundaries between the sexes. In Butler’s words:

The category of ‘sex’ is, from the start, formative…’sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is a part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs…whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce…the bodies it controls. (Bodies That Matter 1)

Every indication of Nan’s gender performances challenges the established boundaries between the sexes in the Victorian era, as her performativity dismantles the notion of sex as a fixed category. It is possible to argue that sex, as a biological aspect of identity, is dominant when determining one’s gender identity, since one’s biological sex, as Butler argues in the quote above, holds “power to produce the bodies it controls” (Bodies That Matter 1). Initially, this claim implies that people generally identify with the biological sex of their body, as it is the norm. However, it is substantial to consider the differences between ‘biological sex’ and the socially constructed notion of ‘gender’, and separate the two.

Transgender theorist Riki Wilchins argues that a person’s physical appearance, if it aligns with their gender identity, confirms how men and women are expected to appear. For example, if a man with male attributes and characteristics appears distinctly masculine, the expectations of gender are confirmed. However, if these expectations are challenged, and a man appears seemingly more feminine than masculine, the expectations are challenged, and the person’s identity is perceived as a ‘gendered failure’ (Wilchins 134). In Nan’s case, although she dresses in traditional male attire and has adopted a male-dominated manner in order to express herself, she is not perceived as ‘a girl who dresses as a boy’ or ‘not enough like a girl dressed up as a boy’, as implied by Jeremiah. The ‘gendered failure’ emphasises a disruption in the expected manifestation of a person’s gender and may cause a sense of distress for not fitting into the social norm. However, this is not always the case, since not meeting the expectation is not always a failure. Nan expresses confidence and poise as she uses when experiencing with the male aspect of her gender identity. The ‘pleasure’ and ‘giddiness’, as emphasised by Jeremiah,
implies a sense of contentment and satisfaction for Nan, who is seemingly content with using cross-dressing and male mannerism to express her gender identity.

However, even though she becomes more and more comfortable with her new identity and the love for her newfound profession, the threat of being exposed as lovers still lingers over Nan and Kitty. Sexual relations between women were de facto tolerated during the Victorian era since lesbianism was not classed as ‘gross indecency’ and thus, was not criminalised, but counted as an ‘irregular sexual activity’, and was frowned upon and condemned by the contemporary perceptions of sexuality (Marsh). Lesley A. Hall describes an anecdote in which it is suggested that the reason for same-sex relations between women was not included as ‘gross indecency’, was because Queen Victoria thought it impossible (Hall 39). However, as norm-breaking relations were frowned upon and the risk of being exposed was constantly present, this can be interpreted as the reason for Kitty’s subsequent actions.

One of the turning points of the novel comes when Nan and Kitty part in a dramatic fashion as Kitty is, literally, caught in the act with Walter, their shared manager. As a result, Nan abruptly ends the relationship with Kitty and undergoes an existential crisis. It is the fear and the constant need to take caution into account that eventually results in Kitty’s infidelity and the separation of the women. It may be argued that Kitty’s future marriage to Walter is founded in her fear of the insecurity and the oppression she might experience, were she to stay with Nan. The security and privilege that Walter could offer her seem more appealing and safe to her than a secret life in the limelight with Nan. It may also be argued that Kitty’s decision to marry Walter is an act of compulsory heterosexuality, an idea which is built on the assumption that heterosexuality is enforced by patriarchal society. Thus, Kitty’s agreement to marry Walter is a way for her to repress her lesbianism, while she, a lesbian woman, would rather succumb to her sexual desires and continue her relationship with Nan. Therefore, one can interpret Kitty’s dismissal of a partnership, professionally, intimately and romantically, with Nan, and the marriage to Walter, as a way for her to secure her future and the professional aspect of her life as a theatrical performer.

As the world as she knows it crumbles around her Nan realises that her masculine attributes and cross-dressing have resulted in male attention: “I was stared at and called after – and twice or thrice seized and stroked and pinched – by men. This, too, had not happened in my old life…” (Waters 191), and she expresses, as if in a stream-of-consciousness, “If only I were a boy, I thought wretchedly. If only I were really a boy…” (Waters 191). Her sudden gender dysphoria, her inability to relate to her own sex and desire to live as another sex, makes
her transform into another version of herself. Nan’s desire to experiment with another gender identity results in her prostituting herself. Dressed as a young man, she receives homosexual male customers who all believe her to be a man. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler emphasises that in the concept of gender dysphoria, it is often assumed that gender traits of the opposite sex (i.e. feminine boys and masculine girls) will lead to heterosexual desires, that is, female traits will lead to male desire and male traits will lead to female desires (*Undoing Gender* 79). Furthermore, Butler argues that, according to this conceptualization, it is “rare…that boy traits in a boy lead to desire for other boys, and that the girl traits in a girl lead to desire for other girls” (*Undoing Gender* 79). This claim is problematic when considering what is claimed to be ‘female’ traits, along with ‘male’ traits, and that only opposites attract. This claim is heteronormative in the sense that it is the norm to presume and expect, that women, or feminine people, are attracted to men, or masculine people. In Nan’s case, she finds desire in Kitty’s male traits at first sight but subsequently, as their relationship has been established, Nan sees Kitty as the woman she is, and both find themselves attracted and drawn to the characteristics and similarities of the other person, that unites them.

Another notion concerning Nan’s queerness and her place in the gender binary is mentioned later in the novel, as she spots an advertisement for lodgings that clearly identifies its person of interest as a ‘fe-male lodger’, to which Nan reflects: “I saw myself in it – in the hyphen” (Waters 211). The gender dysphoria that Nan experiences force her to consider her place in the gender binary. As she experiences an affinity with both masculine and feminine identities, she also feels as if though she does not belong on either side of the continuum of binary gender identities. She finds herself, as quoted, in the hyphen which combines and separates female and male genders, with an unfixed and contingent gender identity; belonging in both a masculine and feminine identity, and simultaneously on the borderline between genders. Here, as Nan experiences a disturbance in her gender identity, it is essential to consider the differences between ‘gendered failure’ and gender dysphoria. As Riki Wilchins claims, ‘gendered failure’ is an external notion, imposed by gender conforming members of society, on people who stand outside the binary of the gender spectrum. If the expectations of gender roles are not met, the identity of the non-conforming person is regarded to be ‘gendered failure’. Gender dysphoria is an internal feeling, experienced by a person who does not relate to the of the gender assigned to them. Thus, if it is acknowledged, gender dysphoria can be used as a device to, if allowed, discover and embrace their true gender identity.
Eventually, Nan starts transitioning from being traditionally female into being perceived as a man. Her transition goes fairly unnoticed by the people she meets, especially her customers, which are all men. Her first customer comments on her feminine appearance, despite the fact that she is disguised as a man: “Your mouth is such a perfect one – quite like a girl’s” (Waters 199), and thus, Nan chooses to never let the customers know of her true identity and gender. Repeatedly, she considers Kitty’s reaction to her new life-choice, as if she is attempting to find a way to express revenge for being betrayed by her partner. Likewise, Nan thinks that she is prostituting herself and pleasures men for Kitty’s sake (Waters 199-200) and the customers she serves seem to make little impression on her: “…with their trousers unbuttoned they all looked the same. I never felt my own lust rise, raising theirs. I didn’t even need the coins they gave me” (Waters 206). Her newfound profession becomes some sort of escapism, a way for Nan to repress the anger, disappointment and betrayal she experiences, a way for her to manage the situation she finds herself in.

Nan steps further into her gender performativity as she becomes acquainted with the older, richer Diana Lethaby. A childless widow, Diana surrounds herself with a ‘chosen family’: a community of Sapphic women which Nan eventually is introduced to. They call themselves ‘tommists’ and resemble male decadents, “also notorious for their rejection of family values…through their taste for scandal-mongering, aphorisms, and grotesquely hyperbolic comments” (Letissier 384). Diana’s queer palace, Felicity Place, is a centre for opulence and decadence, and it is where she brings Nan after their first encounter. Here, their relationship almost instantly becomes consummated, as they engage sexually. Under the pressures of a sexual and hierarchic nature, Nan takes on the role of the assertive partner and Diana the submissive one. Their roles in the sexual act can be mirrored in the male and female gender roles of society: Nan being the sexually dominant, penetrating male, and Diana the penetrated, submissive female. However, even though Nan takes on the assertive role, Diana does not show inferiority during the act. On the contrary, Diana shows signs of being possessive of Nan:

’You should live here with me, and enjoy my privileges. You should eat from my table and ride in my brougham, and wear the clothes I will pick out for you – and remove them, too, when I should ask it.’ (Waters 248-249)

Moreover, Diana expresses dominance and power over Nan by commanding her to perform certain tasks and pressuring her to admit to her inferiority:
'I have watched you upon the streets, remember.' Her face was very close to my own; she would not let me turn my eyes from hers. She said: ‘You’re like me: you have shown it, you are showing it now! It is your own sex for which you really hunger! You thought, perhaps, to stifle your own appetites: but you have only made them swell the more! And that is why you won’t raise a row – why you will stay, and be my tart, as I desire.’ She gave my hair a cruel twist. ‘Admit that it is as I say!’ (Waters 249).

It is evident that the dynamic between the two characters has become challenged and redefined, and the nature of their relationship has transformed into something more complex, in comparison to their first meeting. Diana’s use of physical threat and manipulation forces Nan to obey Diana’s will, which she reluctantly does from fear of being abandoned once again. Subsequently, Diana begins exploiting Nan for sexual favours, as well as displaying Nan’s physical appearance in order to entertain her friends (Wilson 300). Afraid of abandonment and alienation, Nan does not dare to trigger or challenge Diana’s unreliable temper. Moreover, Diana’s custom of displaying women as objects in an inferior position is evidently a way for her to take advantage of her role as a figure of authority.

Diana’s abuse of power can be examined through Foucault’s theory of power relations. As mentioned before, Foucault argues that power is not “acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 94), but is rather a dynamic of network of actions exercised in the interplay of inequality and mobile relations. In his extensive three-volume study of human sexuality, The History of Sexuality, Foucault included discussions of power relations and the repression of sexuality in the Victorian era. He suggested that sexualities that were considered ‘illegitimate’, such as homosexuality, needed a place that tolerated sexual deviations, and that brothels could work as such a place. In Tipping the Velvet, Diana’s home Felicity Place can be considered a place where sexual deviance was accepted and tolerated. As she welcomes her group of ‘tommist’ acquaintances, she also includes them in the ‘brothel of acceptance’, where they are able to act out their ‘sexual deviations’ and participate in unconventional sexual acts far from the intolerant eyes of Victorian society.

One of the final climaxes in the novel comes when Nan is cast out of Felicity Place and abandoned by Diana as a result of engaging in sexual activity with Diana’s domestic worker, Zena. After roaming the streets of London, she finds herself in the East End home of Florence and Ralph; socialist siblings who care for the orphan toddler Cyril. In yet another ‘found family’, Nan is introduced to the struggles of the working class and a community of ‘toms’. It
can be argued that Nan’s need for a queer community shows that it is essential to find a place of belonging where she does not need to feel alienated by being a queer woman, a ‘gendered failure’. Moreover, Rachel Wood argues that Sarah Waters links the rejection of ‘class pretentions’ and the sense of belonging in a working-class home together with “the notion of ‘home’ for women who love and desire women” (Wood 312). Thus, Waters creates a queer, urban utopia for Nan, “where the performance of a subversively gendered body exposes the constructed and contingent nature of the connection between the masculine woman and same-sex desire” (Wood 312). While Florence, engaged in union work and supporting the auxiliary organisation Women’s Cooperative Guild, helps the poor women of Bethnal Green, Nan begins to care for Florence’s well-being:

She was thin, and the thinness looked wrong on her...while the Women’s Cooperative Guild made it their cause to unionise the home-workers of East London, I made it mine to fatten up Florence, with breakfasts and lunches, with sandwich teas, with dinners and suppers and biscuits and milk. (Waters 383)

The nurturing instincts that Nan finds herself experiencing are somewhat new and unfamiliar to her, a notion which can be interpreted as a new kind of awakening for Nan. In Florence, she has found an equal counterpart. The nature of the relationship between Nan and Florence is markedly different in comparison to those between Nan and Kitty and between Nan and Diana. In the former relations, Nan played the role of an inferior, a victim of neglect, abandonment, and abuse. In her newfound relationship with Florence, however, they are each other’s equals, their similar working-class backgrounds creating a balanced dynamic between the two women. Here, Foucault’s theory of power relations becomes relevant once more, since it is claimed by Foucault that power between two individuals is not “acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 94). In the interplay of Nan’s and Florence’s relationship, the power that is held between them is founded on a fair and equal ground, proving Foucault’s theory of power structures wrong, in this particular case.

In the end of the novel, Nan is thriving in the acceptance of Florence’s family and acquaintances. From being rejected by her sister, and by the first love of her life, to finally finding kinship in the creation of a family of her own, Nan seems to flourish in the company of her sweetheart, “supported by a wider network of lesbian family friends” (Yates, 107). Furthermore, she begins to act and dress “in ways that best express her individuality – wearing trousers for comfort or hybrid male/female costumes to suit a mood or occasion” (Wilson 302). She no longer needs to hide her love, as she did in Kitty’s company, or feel the constant pressure
to perform, as she did when living with Diana. Finally, Nan has found comfort in her gender identity, in the hyphen between ‘female’ and ‘male’.

Conclusion
As discussed in this study, there are several indications of queerness depicted throughout the novel which works as contributing factors in determining Nan’s gender and sexual identities. Nan’s sexual awakening occurs when she finds herself drawn to the masculine characteristics of the male impersonator Kitty, which continues as she finds comfort and independence in cross-dressing. Having the opportunity to act, live, and dress as a man allows Nan to discover her own place in the unfixed gender binary. The constant changeability in her gender expressions indicates that Nan experiences discomfort in identifying with and relating to femininity and her assigned gender.

Although Nan’s gender identity is not explicitly determined, the novel presents her gender identity to be fluid and thus non-conforming with the norm that is the gender binary. By cross-dressing, Nan finds comfort and confidence and she becomes more aware of the male privileges of freedom that is provided when people start perceiving her as a man. In terms of her sexual identity, it is clear that Nan is a lesbian with no interest in men. Throughout the novel, she experiences sexual attraction and romantic love towards women only, and never towards the men who serve as her customers. She expresses repulsion when working as a rent boy, as well as in her competition with Walter as his and Kitty’s relationship is revealed. Nan’s attraction and desire towards the cross-dressing Kitty can be interpreted as a way for her to discover her own identity as masculine female, but also as a person with a gender identity that is non-conforming with her female sex.

However, there are certain factors to take into consideration when examining Nan’s gender identity. As the novel is a twentieth-century interpretation of nineteenth-century society, it is important to stress that it is written from a twentieth-century perspective, and not a nineteenth-century, contemporary examination of Victorian values. Therefore, it can be argued that there are problems in applying modern views on gender and sexuality, such as Judith Butler’s theories, on literary works written about situations that take place in another time. However, it is also important to consider the fact that transgender people have always existed,
regardless of how the terms and theories were used to describe and examine their identities. The issues depicted in the novel are, still, universal and relevant for queer people of any gender identity or sexual orientation. Even though the novel is set in the Victorian era, and written hundred years later, Sarah Waters describes universal experiences that queer people can relate to. Alienation and the inability to relate to the norms of society, the distresses of gender dysphoria, and the love and desire between same-sex people are as common in the late 1890’s as they are today. Thus, the theories and ideas of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and the other queer theorists referred to in this essay, are applicable to the analysis and examination that have been carried out.

Since fairly few studies have been made on *Tipping the Velvet*, there are several themes and areas of research that can be examined and discussed from literary perspectives. For example, future research may focus on the issues of class struggle in the novel, using Marxist literary criticism, as well as examining differences and similarities between *Tipping the Velvet* and other literary works which includes a character with a non-conforming, unfixed gender identity, such as *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. Moreover, there is also room for further research on gender, possibly transgender identities, and the examining of male impersonators on the music hall-scene in comparison to drag performances of today, using queer theory.

In conclusion, the significance of cross-dressing is essential in understanding the fluidity and inconsistency of Nan’s gender identity, as it grants her the opportunity to evolve, adapt, and depend on herself in the ever-changing nature of her life.
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