

**‘Sweethearts and Wives’: The Representation of Lesbianism
in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet***

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Pro gradu -tutkielmani tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten Sarah Watersin romaani *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) kuvaa lesboutta. Teos sijoittuu 1800-luvun Englantiin, vaikka onkin ilmestynyt 1990-luvulla, mikä antaa Watersille mahdollisuuden käyttää postmodernille aikakaudellemme ajankohtaista seksuaalivähemmistöihin liittyvää käsitteistöä lesbokuvauksissaan ja samalla uudelleenkirjoittaa lesbohistoriaa. Lähestyn aihetta kahdesta eri näkökulmasta: tarkastelen lesboutta yhtäältä esimerkkinä naismaskuliinisuudesta ja toisaalta romaanin erilaisten lesbosuhteiden kautta.

Tutkimukseni teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu queer-teoriaan, joka kritisoi ajatusta sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta pysyvänä ja muuttumattomana, ja käsittelee ilmiöitä, kuten drag ja ristiinpukeutuminen, jotka korostavat sukupuolen performatiivista luonnetta. Lisäksi erittelen tutkimukseni teoriaosassa viktoriaanisen ajan käsityksiä naisista, avioliitosta ja seksuaalisuudesta. Nämä aiheet ovat oleellisia tutkittaessa Watersin romaania, koska tapahtumien edetessä teoksen päähenkilö Nan löytää seksuaali-identiteettinsä maskuliinisena lesbonaisena nimenomaan performatiivisuuden kautta. Viktoriaanisen ajan naiskäsitteet taas ovat erityisen oleellisia analysoitaessa teoksen lesbosuhteita.

Ensimmäinen analyysilukuni keskittyy naismaskuliinisuuteen lähinnä teoksen päähenkilön Nanin kautta. Tässä luvussa naismaskuliinisuutta ja sen liittymistä tietynlaiseen lesboidentiteettiin käsitellään kolmesta eri näkökulmasta. Ensinnäkin naismaskuliinisuus kuvataan romaanissa teatteriesityksenä, jossa maskuliinisuutta on mahdollista tehdä rooliasujen, hiusten, eleiden ja käytöksen avulla. Toisekseen päähenkilö kävelee Lontoon kaduilla täysin mieheksi naamioituneena välttääkseen naissukupuoleen liittyvän häirinnän ja onnistuu tässä uskottavasti. Lopulta Nan omaksuu maskuliinisuuden osaksi itseään, ja roolien tai naamioitumisen sijaan hänestä vähitellen tulee maskuliininen lesbonainen. Kaksi ensimmäistä naismaskuliinisuuden vaihetta ovat Nanille tärkeitä mahdollisuuksia tutustua omaan seksuaali-identiteettiinsä yhteiskunnassa, jossa naisen tuli olla naisellinen, eikä lesboutta hyväksytty.

Toinen analyysilukuni käsittelee romaanin kolmea varsin erilaista lesbosuhdetta. Nanin ja Kittyn suhde on esitetty naistenvälisenä romanttisena ystävytenä; Nanin ja Diana suhde aggressiivisena seksisuhteena; ja Nanin ja Florencen suhde esimerkkinä lesboperheestä. Romaanin suhteiden välityksellä Waters käsittelee niin viktoriaanisen ajan stereotyyppisiä käsityksiä lesboudesta kuin nykyajan seksuaalivähemmistöille tyypillisiä tai ajankohtaisia ilmiöitä kuten kaapissa elämistä ja sateenkaariperheitä.

Asiasanat: Waters, lesbous, seksuaali-identiteetti, performatiivisuus, naismaskuliinisuus

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1. Introduction

Lesbianism has not been openly visible in literature for very long. In the 19th century, it was not acceptable to write about the topic, and later on lesbianism in literature has often been either ignored altogether or interpreted as something other than lesbianism. Lesbian literature has also been censored, even by the writers of it themselves in order to be able to release their works at all. For example, the lesbian classic *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, both published in 1928, were censored because of their supposedly indecent queer themes. From the 1970s onwards one of the many aims of lesbian theorists has been to develop a canon for lesbian literature (Kekki 17). As a result of this, as well as changes in society in general, both publishing and reading lesbian literature has started to become more acceptable. Nowadays for example the British writer Jeanette Winterson, who focuses on lesbian themes in her novels, has secured her place in the British literary canon. Also, lesbian crime fiction has become relatively popular, especially in the USA.

In this study I will discuss the representation of lesbianism in Sarah Waters's novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). What differentiates Waters from the few writers mentioned above is the fact that, even though published at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, most of her novels are set in the 19th century. Through her many lesbian characters, Waters then offers views of what 19th century lesbianism might have been like, thus perhaps filling some gaps left by the absence or invisibility of lesbianism in authentic 19th century fiction. As Wilson (286) points out, "engaging the Victorians through fiction allows for a reinvestigation of particular elements of Victorian culture". Wilson (286) also argues that since *Tipping the Velvet* is a postmodern Victorian text, it "reveals Waters's awareness of twentieth-century relationships between performance and sexuality for women". Hence, Waters is able to employ current lesbian and queer theories in her writing in order to create a suggested version of 19th century lesbianism.

Sarah Waters (1966-) is a Welsh writer currently living in London. She has published five novels so far: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002), *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Little Stranger* (2009). Out of these, the first three are set in the 19th century while *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* take place in the 1940s. In addition, all five deal with lesbian themes. Waters has won several awards for her work, and both *Fingersmith* and *The Night Watch* have been shortlisted for the Man Booker and Orange Prizes. She has also been named Author of the Year three times, and both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* have been adapted for BBC TV.

Tipping the Velvet is Waters's first novel and its main character is Nancy, or Nan, Astley, an oyster girl from Whitstable, England. According to Jeremiah (135), the novel can be considered a combination of a picaresque novel and a *bildungsroman*. A picaresque novel refers to “an episodic text” that “describes the adventures of a lively and resourceful hero on a journey” whereas a *bildungsroman* is “a novel in which the chief character, after a number of false starts or wrong choices, is led to follow the right path” and to develop into a mature and well-balanced person (Jeremiah 135). The story is told from Nan's point of view as opposed to authentic Victorian texts that usually use third person narration.

Tipping the Velvet is divided into three parts, all describing different phases in Nan's life in chronological order. In the first part Nan, who loves the music halls, falls in love with a male impersonator called Kitty Butler. The two eventually move to London together, become secret sweethearts, and Nan joins Kitty's male impersonating act as Nan King. In the second part Nan and Kitty's relationship ends and Nan briefly works as a male prostitute in the streets of London before beginning another relationship with a wealthy upper-class widow called Diana Lethaby. In this rather sexual relationship, Nan is referred to as Diana's “boy” and she dresses up in various masculine outfits to please Diana and her circle of lesbian friends. In the final part of the novel, Nan comes to terms with her sexual identity as what we would now perceive as a masculine lesbian and forms a possibly lasting and mature relationship with Florence, a socialist with a child. Both female

masculinity and Nan's different lesbian relationships are crucial in Nan's search for her lesbian identity, and these are also the two themes I will concentrate on in this thesis.

My intention, hence, is to look at the representation of lesbianism in *Tipping the Velvet* from two different viewpoints. In the first analysis chapter I will examine how Nan's sexual identity develops through different female masculinities in the course of the novel. Since female masculinity in the novel is most closely connected with the character of Nan, it makes sense to concentrate on her although the character of Kitty will also be examined to an extent in relation to female masculinity as theatrical performance. The three examples of female masculinity present in the novel are theatrical performance, passing and posing as man, and finally masculine lesbian identity. These will be analysed and their connection to lesbianism will be examined. In the second analysis chapter the focus will shift to lesbian relationships. I have divided the main relationships in the novel into three different groups: romantic friendship, sexual relationship and lesbian family. I, then, intend to extend my analysis to how lesbianism is described through the different relationships in the novel. Thus, the first analysis chapter will concentrate on the individual while the second will deal with relationships.

The reason why I think it is relevant to study the representation of lesbianism in *Tipping the Velvet* is threefold. First of all, *Tipping the Velvet* has not been studied closely before, there so far only being a few relatively short articles on it, and therefore I hope to be able to bring some new insight into the topic with my thesis. Secondly, the novel is about the life of lesbians, and I think it is both interesting and important to examine and discuss the representation of sexual minority groups as opposed to always focusing on for example heterosexual women, the representation of whom in literature has already been studied more than that of lesbian women. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, even though published in 1998, *Tipping the Velvet* is set in the 19th century - the late 1880s and the 1890s, to be more precise - and thus it perhaps offers a new angle to the study of lesbianism in literature. As Halberstam (1998, 50) points out, the description of 19th century

lesbianism has often been limited to either romantic friendship or mannish identification. Zimmerman (1986, 18), furthermore, argues that lesbians need to be provided with a tradition, even if it is a retrospective one. *Tipping the Velvet* rewrites lesbian history, or even writes lesbians into history, and in so doing provides interesting suggestions as to what lesbianism at the end of the 19th century could have been like. At the same time, it expands the possibilities of expressing lesbianism in the 19th century compared to more traditional or stereotypical views.

Tipping the Velvet contains rather fierce descriptions of sex between two women and it also deals openly with romantic love between two women as well as female masculinity as a sign of same-sex desire. Considering these facts, it is highly probable that this novel would have been too daring to actually have been published in the 19th century. In the Victorian era, and even later, texts like this would most likely have been censored or banned. However, the style and language of *Tipping the Velvet* are typical of Victorian novels and thus *Tipping the Velvet*, as well as Waters's other novels set in the 19th century, could well pass as a Victorian novel.

Because the aim of this thesis is to analyse lesbianism in *Tipping the Velvet*, I will be using queer theory as the theoretical framework for my study. It is important to point out that some of the terms I use in my analysis, for example *gay*, *lesbian* and *butch*, were not part of Victorian vocabulary because they were either not invented yet or not used in their contemporary sense. I will, however, be using these terms because they are now available for us. *Tipping the Velvet* is a postmodern Victorian text and therefore my intention is to analyse it using contemporary theories on homosexuality and/or queer instead of only discussing same-sex identities, love and desire the way they were perceived in the 19th century. Moreover, because the novel takes place in the 19th century, it is important to shed some light on Victorian values concerning women, marriage and sexuality. In the following theory chapter the key concepts of this study will be introduced. I will begin by providing general information on what is meant by queer theory and how and when it emerged, and will then go on to discuss the notions of gender performativity, cross-dressing and

female masculinity in further detail. The final part of the theory chapter will focus on Victorian values.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will present the theoretical framework for my thesis. Because my intention is to focus on the themes of lesbianism, cross-dressing and female masculinity in *Tipping the Velvet*, this study needs to be placed within the field of queer theory. I will begin with an introduction into the background and definitions of queer theory and will then move on to present the key concepts of the study. Since *Tipping the Velvet* is set in the Victorian era, it is also essential and useful to provide a historical framework for further analysis of the novel. Therefore, the last section of this chapter focuses on discussing Victorian women, marriage and sexuality.

2.1 Queer Theory: Background and Definitions

This study falls under the field of queer theory. However, in order to be able to understand why queer theory emerged and what the issues it deals with are, we need to go back to its roots, namely feminist theory and criticism, as well as lesbian and gay studies.

According to Abrams and Greenblatt (23), feminist criticism “seeks to rectify sexist discrimination and inequalities”. Historically, women have been oppressed by the patriarchy in multiple ways – some examples are the division into private and public spheres whereupon women have been forced to stay at home taking care of the family and the home while men have worked outside the home and provided for the family; the underestimating of women in all branches of the public sphere when they have indeed been allowed to enter it; and the invisibility of women in areas such as politics and literature. As a result of feminist theory and criticism ever since the 1960s, some revolutionary changes within for example literary and cultural studies have taken place – the literary canon has extended through more thorough analysis of literature written by women; sexist representations and values have come to be criticised; the importance of gender and sexuality has been emphasised; and institutional and social reforms have been proposed (Leitch et al. 23).

What has been problematic with mainstream feminist theory, however, is the fact that the spokespeople for it have often come from a certain kind of background, thus representing only certain kind of women with certain kinds of experiences. As a result, until relatively recently, white middle-class heterosexual woman has been the norm for feminist theory, and all other groups of women have then been defined in relation to that norm (Morris 165). However, it is obvious that not all women share the same experiences: women come from different racial, cultural and social backgrounds and they have different sexual identities and different political opinions. These women have felt “silenced and unrepresented in mainstream social agendas”, which have not considered their needs and issues (Abrams and Greenblatt 24). As a result, women of different backgrounds and experiences developed their own theories in order to give a voice to women who do not consider themselves represented within the framework of mainstream feminism.

Kimberlé Crenshaw has coined the term *intersectionality* to refer to the “the complex interaction between a range of discourses, institutions, identities, and forms of exploitation” (Sullivan 72). In other words, intersectionality means that, instead of acting independently, different modes of oppression such as race, class, gender and sexuality intersect, and thus the same person can be oppressed on multiple levels at the same time.

Lesbian feminism emerged as one subgroup of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s to challenge mainstream feminism. Its aims were most closely connected with identity as lesbian feminists were concerned with “fear of and hostility towards lesbianism” and, as a response to this, wanted to “project a positive lesbian identity” (Morris 167). Lesbian feminism critiques the concept of heterosexism as “the set of values and structures that assumes heterosexuality to be the only natural form of sexual and emotional expression” (Zimmerman, 1986, 201). After all, women have not “searched for emotional and sexual fulfilment only through men” but through other women as well (Zimmerman, 1986, 202). Furthermore, lesbian criticism intended to define what is meant by lesbianism and how it can be recognized (Morris 167). In other words, as Morris (167) puts it,

“claiming and proclaiming a lesbian identity” has been an essential goal for lesbian feminism. With regard to literature in particular, lesbian works have often been excluded from both the traditional and the feminist canon. According to Zimmerman (1986, 217), “it is a matter of serious concern that lesbian literature is omitted from anthologies or included in mere token amounts”. Lesbian critics, therefore, aim “to develop a lesbian canon, and then to establish a lesbian critical perspective” (Zimmerman, 1986, 203). However, lesbian critics have faced many challenges, possibly the biggest of which has been their need to “provide lesbians with a tradition, even if a retrospective one” (Zimmerman, 1986, 208). Lesbian critics have therefore for example re-read old texts in order to reveal their lesbian aspects. This has not been an easy task because writers of lesbian literature have been “silenced by a homophobic and misogynist society” and “forced to adopt coded and obscure language and internal censorship” in order to be able to write about lesbian topics at all (Zimmerman, 1986, 207). In conclusion, the most important goals for lesbian feminism have been challenging heterosexism, defining lesbianism, creating a positive image of lesbians and, especially in literature, constructing a lesbian tradition.

Similarly to lesbian feminism, the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s was concerned with gay identity and pride (Jagose 40). This kind of distinctly gay identity was revolutionary in that its goal was to “overthrow the social institutions which marginalised and pathologised homosexuality” as both a psychiatric sickness and, prior to that, also a crime (Jagose 37). Thus, more than seeking social recognition, gay liberationists wanted to enable “a new and unmediated sexuality for all people” (Jagose 37).

According to Zimmerman (1997, 156), however, it was not until the 1980s that gay and lesbian studies united and found its place in the academia in the USA and Britain. Munt (1997, xiv) explains that lesbian studies was originally a subgroup within women’s studies and, similarly, gay studies a subgroup within critical and cultural studies. This common experience of being in the minority within a larger theoretical field eventually lead to lesbians and gay men teaming up in

order to create a common theory for these two sexual minority groups. Lesbian and gay studies “concentrates on the ideological analysis of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity” and it aims to “disclose the mechanisms of sexual oppression” (Munt 1997, xiv). It also aims to make sexual minority groups more visible, to create a more positive image of homosexuality, and as Jagose (84) adds, to naturalise homosexuality.

Some theorists see queer theory only as the latest transformation of lesbian and gay studies (Jagose 2). However, when lesbian and gay studies mainly concentrates on two categories of sexuality, queer theory expands its field into practically any kind of sexuality or sexual identity, whether somehow “deviant” or normative. The term ‘queer’ came into use in its most recent sense at the beginning of the 1990s and it is, according to Jagose (76) “a product of specific cultural and theoretical pressures which increasingly structured debates about questions of lesbian and gay identity”. Similarly to lesbian and gay studies, identity is also important for queer theory. However, even though both lesbian and gay studies and queer theory are concerned with identity, there is a difference between how they perceive it. As Jagose (76) puts it, the “non-specificity” of the term ‘queer’ “guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ as identity categories”. In other words, unlike lesbian and gay, queer is not a fixed category and it does not have or seek to have one permanent or unchanging definition. Rather, queer is a mobile and flexible concept that changes all the time, which is also why I see it fit to talk about definitions of queer, in plural.

Queer theory is not merely a product of lesbian and gay politics and theory but has been influenced by other schools of thought as well. It is important to note the poststructuralist context of queer, for example. According to Jagose (76-77), the “models of identity, gender and sexuality which in large part underwrite the queer agenda have changed”. In relation to this, she (77) refers to Bristow and Wilson, who argue, in distinguishing the Gay Liberation Front from Queer Nation, that the politics of identity has been replaced by a politics of difference. Duggan, also referred to in

Jagose (77), furthermore, notes that, in queer models, similarity to other groups has been replaced by “the rhetoric of difference”. The identifying of difference as crucial for queer is “not specific to queer but characteristic of post-structuralism in general” (Jagose 77). When lesbian and gay studies considered identity politics necessary for political intervention, queer instead shifts its attention to both “post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent” and “the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation” (Jagose 77). This, Jagose (77-78) claims, has “enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organisation”. Theorists such as Althusser, Lacan, Freud, Saussure and Foucault have been influential in providing the poststructuralist context for queer. Especially Foucault’s view of sexuality as a cultural category that is the effect of power as opposed to being its object has been significant for queer scholarship (Jagose 79).

Finally, queer theory can be considered a specifically postmodern approach to sexuality studies. According to Beasley (125-126), “in the 1990s Postmodern positions influenced by interpretations of the work of Michel Foucault were strongly advanced” and these positions “resisted identity terms like gay and lesbian in favour of perspective-oriented analyses described as poststructuralist, postmodern or Queer”. Similarly, Walters (8) points out that the rise of postmodernism in social theory resulted in critique of “‘identity politics’ as constructing a potential hegemony around the identity ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ as if that necessarily supposed a unified and coherent subjectivity: gay person”. In other words, “postmodern theory challenges the idea of gay identity as expressing ‘true’ – not constructed – gay sexuality” (Walters 9). Beasley (126), furthermore, argues that there is “a strong awareness of sexuality as a part of power” in postmodern approaches to sexuality because when sexuality is “no longer confined to one heterosexual path defined by a gendered binary opposition of men and women, then sexualised power can be produced in many places and can disrupt any simple ‘othering’ of marginalised sexual groups”.

According to queer theory, then, identities are not fixed – instead, they are an ongoing process and therefore cannot be labelled or categorised. This is one of the reasons why I want to use queer theory as the theoretical framework for this study – queer is a more open category than lesbian studies because it does not permanently determine one’s sexual identity. Instead, it recognises the fact that sexual identities can change, which is why it is not necessary to determine and label people permanently as belonging to one category. Even though I will use the word ‘lesbian’ when referring to the characters in *Tipping the Velvet*, I want to use the broader framework available for analysing them instead of determining them as representing only one kind of or one aspect of sexuality.

Queer theory bases itself on elements taken from feminist criticism, gender studies, women’s studies, and lesbian and gay studies. According to Leitch et al. (25), queer theory criticises “the dominant heterosexual binary, masculine/feminine, which enthrones ‘the’ two sexes and casts other sexualities as abnormal, illicit or criminal”. It is most closely associated with lesbian and gay sexualities but it also aims to study other sexualities that can be defined as deviant, perverse or alternative. According to Jagose (3), “queer focuses on the mismatches between sex, gender and desire”. Queer theorists emphasise the socially constructed character of different sexualities (Leitch et al 25), and some topics that are included in queer theory’s analytical framework are for example “hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery”. Even the seemingly unproblematic categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are questioned in queer theory. (Jagose 3)

With regard to this thesis in particular, it is important to note that queer theorists have focused on for example drag, cross-dressing and transsexuality as these are phenomena which “highlight the nonbiological, performative aspects of gender construction” (Leitch et al 25). In *Tipping the Velvet*, these performative aspects of gender construction are crucial as through cross-dressing, the main character is trying to find her sexual identity. Thus, in addition to being a more flexible theory than lesbian and gay studies, queer theory is relevant for this study because of the wide range of topics related to sexuality it covers. In the following subchapter I will elaborate on how gender can be

queered and present the key terms of this study, namely gender performativity, cross-dressing and female masculinity. As in this thesis the focus will be on these phenomena in connection with the main character of *Tipping the Velvet*, it is essential to understand what is meant by them.

2.2 Queering Gender: Performativity, Cross-Dressing, Female Masculinity

Sex and gender are generally understood to have different meanings. While sex refers to one's biological sex, gender, on the other hand, is considered culturally constructed. Together these two concepts form a binary relation where sex and gender represent nature and culture, respectively. One of the first theorists to discuss the distinction between sex and gender was radical feminist Gayle Rubin. In her two articles 'The Traffic in Women' and 'Thinking Sex', both published in 1975, she points out that while sexual difference and gender difference are related, "they are not the same thing" (Kekki 15). While sex as a biological category might seem rather fixed and unproblematic since it is, after all, seen as the mark of one's physical body, gender is a more open category that is affected by culture. Since gender can be considered culturally constructed and thus acquired separately from sex, it cannot be considered to be caused by sex or to somehow reflect it (Butler, 1999, 142). Instead, Judith Butler (1999, 10) argues that "taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders". Because of this discontinuity, it is possible to theorize gender independently of sex. This means that any sexed body, whether male or female, can be signified by the words *man*, *masculine* as well as *woman* and *feminine* because sex does not limit gender in any way (Butler 1999, 10). Butler (1999, 10) also questions the stability of sex but she explains that even if one assumes that the sexes are unproblematic and fixed, "there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two". In addition, it is possible for one sexed body to have several different genders at the same time (Butler, 1999, 142-143). Hence, for Butler, gender is a ground for endless opportunities and different identities.

Butler is indeed a crucial theorist with regard to my study. According to Jagose (83), for example, Butler is “the theorist who has done most to unpack the risks and limits of identity” within lesbian and gay studies. Especially her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) have been influential for queer theory, presenting and discussing the concept of gender performativity.

According to Butler and many other queer theorists, heterosexuality in our society has been naturalized. In other words, “heterosexuality is assumed to be a neutral or unmarked form of sexuality” (Jagose 17) – the norm of which other sexual identities are considered deviations. However, Butler (1999, 161) explains that neither the institution of naturalized heterosexuality nor the category of sex is in fact natural – instead, they are socially instituted political categories. These categories are then used to serve “the purposes of reproductive sexuality” (Butler 1999, 143). This kind of division of bodies into male and female sexes serves “the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality” (Butler 1999, 143). In other words, in order for this compulsory heterosexuality to be able to exist, there needs to be a division into male and female subjects to support it.

In Butler’s (1999, 30) view, in addition to the two sexes, the institution of naturalized heterosexuality also requires gender as a binary relation where the masculine and the feminine are differentiated from one another. This, Butler (1999, 30) argues, is achieved “through the practices of heterosexual desire”. Jagose (85) explains that what naturalises heterosexuality is “the performative repetition of normative gender identities”, that is to say female femininity and male masculinity. When heterosexuality is the norm, the result of this is that identities where gender is not the result of sex and “those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” cannot exist (Butler 1999, 24). To be more precise, normative heterosexuality negates the existence of genders and desires that are not the consequence of the corresponding sex.

However, as mentioned earlier, because gender is not as fixed a category as sex presumably is, it should be possible to create or express gender regardless of one's biological sex. According to Butler, then, the system of naturalized heterosexuality whereby sex and gender are made to signify heterosexual values can indeed be deconstructed. She (1999, 172-173) points out that when gender is falsely stabilised to suit the purposes of the heterosexual institution, various gender discontinuities within gay and lesbian, bisexual, as well as heterosexual contexts remain concealed. Heterosexual coherence needs to be exposed "as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe" (Butler 1999, 173). This, according to Butler, can be achieved through showing the performative nature of gender.

Butler (1999, 173) points out that when thinking of gender identification as something that can be enacted, it is obvious and understandable that coherence is still both desired and idealized. To provide an example, if a woman wants to perform masculinity, she will probably strive to reproduce those elements of masculinity that are typical of the heterosexually coherent masculinity. In other words, it is desirable to reproduce as convincing a version as possible of that which is enacted. For example gestures, acts and desires usually associated with male or female behaviour can be used as signs of certain kinds of identities to "produce the effect of an internal core" of some kind (1999, 173). Hence, it is possible, then, to reveal the performative nature of these signs of gender through imitating them "on the surface of the body" (Butler 1999, 173). At the same time it becomes clear that because it is indeed possible to reproduce these signs, the gendered body cannot have a fixed original or an ontological status. Instead, its reality is constituted by the different acts that are reproducible. These acts are "fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler 1999, 173). Thus, gender loses its supposed status as a fixed heterosexual category and reappears as a reproducible performance.

What concrete example could then be used to reveal the performative nature of gender? Butler (1999, 174) argues that gender parody within drag "effectively mocks both the expressive model of

gender and the notion of a true gender identity”. In other words, in drag a person can look feminine on the outside because of the way they are dressed and otherwise styled, and be masculine on the inside at the same time because their sexed body is male. In addition to this, that same person can have a masculine body on the outside and feel feminine on the inside on the level of gender identity. Hence, drag reveals the multiple levels of gender that a person can have or express at the same time. The performance of drag then enables the anatomy of the performer to differ from the gender that is performed, which shows that because gender can be denaturalised through performance, it cannot in fact be natural but instead appears as fabricated (Butler 1999, 175, 186). As Butler (1999, 175) puts it, drag “reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*” (italics in the original). Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that for Butler (1999, 175), “parody is of the very notion of an original”. Therefore, there is no original that parody can imitate but rather that which is assumed to be the original is in fact “an imitation without an origin” as well (Butler 1999, 175). In conclusion, compulsory heterosexuality can be deconstructed by showing that gender is in fact performative by nature. What is then achieved is the idea of gender identity as fluid, flexible and, as a result, attachable to any sexuality or sex.

The connection between drag and performativity has often been misunderstood, and in *Bodies That Matter*, a follow-up for *Gender Trouble*, Butler clarifies what she means when linking these two. Based on *Gender Trouble*, drag has often been mistaken “to be *exemplary* of performativity” when Butler has merely meant to cite it as *one* example of performativity (Butler, 1993, 230, italics in the original). According to her (1993, 230-231), “if drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as drag”. Furthermore, she (1993, 95) adds that “performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance”. Instead, Butler (*ibid.*) argues, performativity is “a regularized and constrained

repetition of norms” – “not a singular ‘act’ or event” but “a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo”. Hence, as Jagose (87) points out, gender performativity “is not something a subject *does*, but a process through which that subject is *constituted*” (italics in the original).

Another way of constructing and therefore also deconstructing gender is cross-dressing. The term cross-dresser refers to someone who dresses up in the clothes of the opposite sex. In other words, then, there is both male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing. The cultural fascination of cross-dressing has been visible in many aspects of popular culture, for example film (e.g. *Tootsie*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), TV (e.g. *Monty Python*, *Little Britain*) and music (e.g. Madonna, David Bowie). Cross-dressing is also frequently present in media, and academic studies have been interested in it as well. (Garber 5)

Marjorie Garber has examined cross-dressing in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992). According to Garber (4), cross-dressing is closely associated with gay identity. In fact, she (4) claims that cross-dressing and gay identity are so closely related that “no analysis of ‘cross-dressing’ that wants to interrogate the phenomenon seriously from a cultural, political, or even aesthetic vantage point can fail to take into account the foundational role of gay identity and gay style”. To exemplify her claim, she mentions fashion and stage design, female impersonating as well as the phenomena of drag and voguing, a campy dance style imitating runway modelling that was especially popular among gay men in the 1990s. However, it should be mentioned that Garber’s book is from the early 1990s and it is quite possible that some of her views are somewhat outdated by now. Nevertheless, it can be said that gay identity and cross-dressing have intertwined to an extent. Despite this, however, it is also important not to restrict cross-dressing to the context of homosexuality – after all, it also has other meanings “of self-definition and political and cultural display” (Garber 5). Therefore, while cross-dressing and homosexuality “constantly intersect and intertwine, both willingly and unwillingly”, it is still clear that neither is “a

sign for the other” (Garber 130). Some cross-dressing behaviours are homosexual while others are not.

In Garber’s (10) view, cross-dressing is a crucial way of challenging certain notions of binarity as, like Butler’s notion of performativity, it shows the constructed nature of gender. Garber (132) refers to Money who points out that because “dressing is traditionally gender-coded almost everywhere on earth, cross dressing is one highly specific art of gender crosscoding”. The cross-dresser, then, becomes “the third” that disrupts the harmony of the binaries of male/female, gay/straight and sex/gender (Garber 133). Garber (13) argues that “this disruptive act of putting in question” is “precisely the place, and the role, of the transvestite”. In other words, the cross-dresser indicates the place of what Garber (16) calls “category crisis” – through cross-dressing the notions of “the ‘original’ and of stable identity” can be questioned. If a man can dress up as a woman and woman as a man, and if the supposed original can thus be constructed and reconstructed, there cannot in fact be an original.

There are differences between cross-dressers and what their cross-dressing aims at. First of all, there is a difference between transvestites and transsexuals. Many transsexuals want to change their physical bodies while transvestites have no interest in doing so (Garber 129). Both transsexualism and transvestism can be associated with both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Furthermore, according to Garber (132), there is both transvestic fetishism (transvestophilia) and non-fetishistic cross-dressing. Some cross-dressers want to pass as the opposite sex while others are interested in female or male impersonating (Garber 14). Finally, for many gay men and lesbian women, dressing up in the clothes of the opposite sex is an important part of expressing their sexual identity. For example, the lesbian roles of butch and femme, which will be discussed in further detail later on, often play with masculinity and femininity through dress. In *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, Nan explores her sexual identity through cross-dressing, expressing her masculinity by dressing up in men’s clothing.

Garber (132) mentions that non-fetishistic cross-dressing “is commonly known as transvestism”. However, I disagree with her in that people in general would assume transvestism to be non-fetishistic. On the contrary, the word transvestite has certain cultural connotations that often result in it being understood to refer to someone who derives sexual pleasure from wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. Therefore, it is important to emphasise the distinction between fetishistic and non-fetishistic cross-dressing. In my view, cross-dressing for a fetishistic transvestite is serious and always sexually pleasing – in other words, it is a crucial part of their personality, sexuality and sexual behaviour. However, while non-fetishistic cross-dressing can also stem from sexuality or the cross-dresser’s sexual identity, it does not have to do so. As a result, this kind of cross-dressing is also often used in theatre to create a humorous effect. Cross-dressing and theatre have indeed quite a few things in common: both involve disguise, costume and role playing (Garber 29). However, non-fetishistic cross-dressing in theatrical contexts and non-fetishistic cross-dressing stemming from sexual identity perhaps differ from each other in that while in theatre cross-dressing is often role playing, for example a masculine lesbian does not necessarily play a part but on the contrary often does what feels natural for her (Garber 147). On the other hand, sometimes it might be difficult to distinguish between role-playing and sexual identity as for example drag queens and kings can indeed portray both at the same time.

Passing in connection to cross-dressing refers to the fact that when cross-dressed as the opposite sex, the person in question may also be able to pass as the opposite sex and go unnoticed in certain situations. For example, a woman dressed up in men’s clothes might be able to pass as a man and vice versa. Whittle (126) asserts that for a cross-dresser, then, dress is a sort of disguise that hides the passing cross-dresser. Similarly, Sullivan (90) compares passing with the idea of masquerade, “a performance in and through which one ‘passes’”. She (106), furthermore, goes on to equate passing with “becoming invisible”. Hence, passing has to do with disguise, masquerade and, in a way, becoming invisible – in other words, it could also be seen as a sort of performance that plays with

traditional gender roles. The passing cross-dresser hides themselves and observes the world and moves in it disguised as someone else, experiencing everything from the perspective of the opposite sex.

Like with cross-dressing, there are different reasons as to why a person might want to pass, and in relation to *Tipping the Velvet* in particular, why a woman might want to pass as a man. As Halberstam (1998, 168) points out, the most common reasons for female-to-male passing have often been “transition and mobility”. She (1998, 168) mentions that over the last three hundred years, women have “donned men’s clothing, very often military uniforms, and made their way in the world passing back and forth between places and genders”. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, some passing women lived as pirates at sea, some joined the army as men, and some entered male professions and took female lovers disguised as men (Halberstam 1998, 168). Furthermore, Epstein Nord (118; 241) mentions several authentic cases of women passing as male in the 19th century: George Sand walked the streets of Paris and attended the theatre successfully in men’s clothes, and, similarly, Vita Sackville-West walked down Piccadilly in London as a man without anyone suspecting her of actually being a woman. In *Tipping the Velvet* Nan is in a similar situation when she walks the streets of London dressed up in men’s uniforms and other costumes, and passes as a male prostitute for men. Passing as male has thus granted women more public space and the chance to escape being treated as objects or being shut out of men’s affairs to the private sphere assigned for women. In other words, passing has offered a chance for women to step beyond the supposed limits of femaleness.

Since this thesis is concerned with lesbianism, it is especially important to understand how cross-dressing and lesbian masculinity are related and, furthermore, what is meant by female masculinity. Traditionally, masculinity has, after all, been seen as an exclusive element of the male body and maleness. Masculinity studies as a field of study emerged in the 1970s. However, Judith

Halberstam is the first theorist to expand masculinity studies into women. Her book *Female Masculinity* (1998) is the first full-length study on masculine women, lesbians in particular.

According to Halberstam (1998, 16), white male heterosexual masculinity “has obscured all other masculinities”. However, it is important to point out that despite this, “masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men and does not properly express male heterosexuality” (Halberstam 1998, 241). On the contrary, masculinity has also been produced by “masculine women, gender deviants, and often lesbians” (Halberstam 1998, 241). Therefore, to claim that masculinity could only be linked with male-sexed bodies and behaviour would be inaccurate (Halberstam 1998, 241). Halberstam (1998, 1) points out that through female masculinity we can better understand the constructed nature of masculinity. Because masculinity can be extended to female-sexed bodies as well, it cannot be a sign of maleness only. Halberstam (1998, 2-3) in fact argues that since masculinity “becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body”, its many forms are actually best exposed within female masculinity.

Halberstam (1998, 41) explains that “the most obvious forms of female masculinity” are tomboyism and butchness. Tomboyism refers to girls acting and looking masculine in their childhood (Halberstam 1998, 5). This kind of female masculinity is often tolerated until the girls reach a certain age. If tomboyism “threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence”, it is often punished because, eventually, girls are expected to conform to feminine gender ideals (Halberstam 1998, 6).

According to Halberstam (1998, 119-120), masculinity has always played a crucial role within lesbianism and, as a result, we even have a specific term for lesbian masculinity: butch. Halberstam (1998, 28) points out that “female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire” and, furthermore, that lesbian masculinity is often not met with approval. Halberstam (1998, 120) refers to Gayle Rubin who explains that butches express masculinity in

various different ways: “some butches are invested in masculine accoutrements such as clothing and hairstyle, and others actually experience themselves as male; some are gender dysphoric, some are transvestites, some pass as men”. Thus, the butch experience is not uniform but rather there are differences within butches. Furthermore, because of the masculine appearance of butch women, cross-dressing can be linked with lesbian masculinity. In Halberstam’s (1998, 241) view, “a popular misunderstanding of lesbian butchness depicts it as either an appropriation of dominant male masculinity or an instance of false consciousness in which the butch simply lacks strong models of lesbian identity”. However, since Halberstam (1998, 241) argues that masculinity can also be produced by women, it can be said that butches do not imitate male masculinity but rather create their own version of masculinity altogether. Similarly, Beasley (237) adds that instead of being simply “a minority version of masculinity”, “female masculinity represents the opportunity to escape from and/or reconfigure gender and sexuality power arrangements”.

Sally R. Munt has edited a book called *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (1998), which contains various descriptions and analyses of butchness and femmeness from poems and short stories to essays, memoirs and photographs. Munt (1998, 1) argues that there are at least two ways of understanding butch/femme: epistemologically, it can be considered a gender characteristic – “a style of knowing, interpreting, and doing lesbian gender” – and ontologically, a way of being and having an identity. Munt (1998, 2) sees butch/femme as a visual, tactile and oral way “of looking and being looked at” as well as a “practice of everyday life”. Moreover, butch and femme are the most public lesbian genders and are therefore constantly there to remind us of the fact that “sex/gender norms are anything but stable and are in the service of patriarchy”. This might be one reason why butch women are often considered threatening, “both by mainstream culture and by feminists who still see such expressions of gender complementarity as regressive and politically problematic”. (Roof 35) The butch is, then, often considered a “failed woman (too little woman)”

and the femme “a hyper-woman (too much a woman)”, perhaps in order to make these lesbian genders less threatening to hegemonic gender values (Munt 1998, 3).

Because a butch woman might not be easily readable as woman, she can pass as man in various situations, whether it is her intention or not. Both Halberstam and Garber mention public bathrooms as a typical place for this kind of passing. It is often the case that a masculine woman in a women’s bathroom has to prove her femaleness in order to gain the right to enter it (Halberstam 1998, 21). However, in most other situations there is no reason to prove one’s femaleness and, as a result, it is often possible for a masculine woman to pass successfully.

Halberstam (1998, 119) mentions that masculinity “often defines the stereotypical version of lesbianism”. However, it is important to bear in mind that lesbianism refers to various “kinds of sexual desires and acts” (Halberstam 1998, 56). In other words, there are differences within lesbians and how they express their sexual identity. Therefore, the lesbian experience cannot be summarized and, instead, it has many different meanings and ways of expression. Butchness is therefore only one way of expressing lesbianism.

If butch refers to lesbian masculinity, its counterpart femme is used accordingly to refer to lesbian femininity. Halberstam (1998, 121) explains that in the 1970s many lesbian feminists “rejected butch/femme and its forms of sexual role playing as a gross mimicry of heterosexuality”. However, as Butler (1999, 157) points out, the idea of butch and femme as copies of heterosexual roles underestimates their erotic significance “as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled”. In other words, it is important to remember that the existence of butch and femme identities actually questions the notion of “an original or natural identity” (Butler 1999, 157).

It needs to be remembered that not all female masculinities are connected to lesbianism. In this study, however, the focus will be on lesbian masculinity because nearly all the characters in *Tipping the Velvet* are lesbians. It is also important to bear in mind that the point of female masculinity is

not to “create another binary in which masculinity always signifies power” (Halberstam 1998, 29). In other words, female masculinity and female femininity are not each other’s opposites, and female masculinity is not “a female version of male masculinity” (Halberstam 1998, 29). Rather, female masculinity is a phenomenon that stands on its own, possibly producing “unpredictable results” (Halberstam 1998, 29).

2.3 Victorian Values: Women, Marriage and Sexuality

Because *Tipping the Velvet* is set in the late 19th century, it is important to place it in its historical context and shed some light on Victorian values concerning women, marriage and sexuality. In this subchapter I will therefore provide a historical background for further analysis of the novel.

According to Abrams and Greenblatt, the Victorian era can be said to cover the period between the years 1830 and 1901. However, it is impossible to use such exact dates because in reality Victorian values were already present before the year 1830 and continued to be after 1901. In Victorian times, marriage was considered very important. According to Vicinus (x), the family was “the cornerstone of Victorian society” and women’s only “function was marriage and procreation”. However, women’s rights, in marriage and otherwise, were extremely limited. When Victoria became Queen in 1837, women were not allowed to own or be in charge of their property. In addition, women had no vote, they could not hold political office, nor had they the rights to the custody of their children (Abrams and Greenblatt 1871; Bellamy 131). Furthermore, it was difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to divorce her husband; while men could divorce their wives for adultery, women could do so only if their husbands were guilty of bigamy, cruelty, incest, rape or bestiality as well (Hoppen 320). Despite all this, however, marriage also had positive connotations to it. It “conferred status, sanctioned legitimate sex” and “provided companionship, children, perhaps even love” (Hoppen 318). Also, even though in marriage a woman transferred from father

to husband and thus remained under the protection of a man, many women still saw marriage as a chance to become independent (Hoppen 318).

Changes in women's rights began to arise towards the end of the 19th century, which is also when *Tipping the Velvet* takes place, and some extensions were made to the laws concerning women and marriage. Abrams and Greenblatt (1871) mention for example changes in mother's rights to access to her children with The Custody Act of 1839; the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857; and the Married Women's Property Acts 1870-1908. Thus, some improvements were eventually made to better women's position. However, it has to be remembered that despite these changes women still did not have the same rights as men and in most cases it was still the man who could decide over his wife and children. Women were defined in relation to men – in other words, through their roles as mother, wife and daughter (Nead 28).

According to Vicinus (ix), something referred to as “the perfect lady” was the Victorian ideal woman, even though this ideal developed mostly in the upper middle class only. Despite this, it was what women of all classes should strive for the best they could. The perfect lady represented respectable femininity, in other words chastity and purity, and as a result was to be brought up “innocent and sexually ignorant” (Vicinus ix). Family affection and the desire for motherhood, however, were considered natural and even desirable. The perfect lady was kept in the home under her parents' supervision until she was married. As a wife, she did not work but instead had servants to do the housework and nannies and governesses to take care of the children. The perfect lady socialized only with her family and close friends. Her status depended first on the economic position of her father and then on that of her husband. (Vicinus ix) However, as mentioned, this was only an ideal and in reality few women, even in the middle classes, could afford to live like perfect ladies should.

According to Nead (24), “particular feminine roles and functions were allocated a special status and importance and in this way the feminine ideal was represented as a desirable and unsurpassable

goal to which all women would naturally aspire”. In other words, women were raised to want to be respectably feminine by attaching positive connotations to their position and duties in marriage. The significance of the roles of the ideal woman as wives and mothers was twofold: moral on one hand, medical on the other. As Nead (24) points out, as a moral “guardian of the private sphere, woman was believed to play an essential part in the construction and perpetuation of domestic and social order”. This way, respectable femininity was defined as both personally gratifying and socially significant. In the discourse of medicine, on the other hand, respectable femininity was seen as healthy and normal. This view was taken seriously because medicine as a science was associated with truth and objectivity. (Nead 25) Also, marriage, pregnancy and breast-feeding were thought to ensure female health (Nead 26). Hence, Nan in *Tipping the Velvet* deviates from the Victorian femininity ideals quite dramatically because of her masculinity.

Motherhood was considered to be the most important feminine role. In fact, Victorians went as far as to claim that motherhood was why women existed and that it was the main source of pleasure and happiness for women. Motherhood signified feminine purity and it was “an unattainable model for all other human relationships” (Nead 26). This model of course had its roots deep in Christianity and in the image of the Madonna and Child as “a paradigm of maternal devotion and purity” (Nead 26). Motherhood was something that all women should want to aspire for - not having or wanting to have children was considered deviant.

Class differences are essential when discussing Victorian marriage as the experiences of the middle classes and the working class were not entirely similar. According to Nead (5), the middle class felt the need to create a class identity that would define the middle class as distinct from the other social and economic classes. This identity was achieved “through the formation of shared notions of morality and respectability – domestic ideology and the production of clearly demarcated gender roles were central figures in this process of class definition”. For middle-class women, marriage was often the only option as they could not earn an independent living on their own

“without losing their social status as ‘ladies’” (Billington 120). Also, some middle-class women married because their families could not afford to support them if they had stayed at home (Thane 191). Whatever the reasons for their marriage, middle-class wives were supposed to stay in the private and natural sphere of home and family and protect their husbands from domestic affairs (Hoppen 316). Their role “was to create a place of peace where man could take refuge from the difficulties of modern life” (Abrams and Greenblatt 1873). The husbands were also supposed to protect their wives from something, namely public affairs. According to Nead (29), female dependency on men “was believed to be a natural and gratifying component of respectable femininity” and, instead of constraining women, male protection was thought to “shield them from the harsh vicissitudes of public life”. It is clear that middle-class women and men functioned in completely separate spheres and had completely different tasks and duties.

Also, since family and marriage were important for Victorians, women were seen to have more moral authority than their husbands through their roles as wives and mothers. It was women’s responsibility “to instil moral values into children, particularly male ones” (Billington 120). Thus, mothers were supposed to set a good example for their children so that when growing up they would learn their place in society. In reference to this, middle-class women’s public behaviour was to be ladylike and respectable (Billington 122).

Respectable middle-class women were not supposed to work and get paid for it, so in order to keep themselves busy and useful outside the home somehow, they often engaged in charity work (Vicinus xi). They did church work, went into the homes of the poor and into gaols and brothels. Also, even though women were not supposed to earn any money of their own, they were nevertheless often the ones to take care of family finance. (Hoppen 333)

For working-class women, it was impossible to become the perfect lady because of economic and social reasons. The perfect lady was not supposed to work but working-class women had to do just that from an early age to help provide for the family. They also lived in cramped houses where

sexual innocence was hard to maintain. (Vicinus xii) Regardless of the bad housing situation, moral purity was still important for the working classes as well – mainly because bad reputation could result in a family member losing their job and the loss of a source of income (Vicinus xiii). Thus, in the working classes, women often had a job, for example in a factory or in the mines, before they got married, and some continued to work when married as well. According to Stearns (113), however, the working-class wife was not supposed to work outside the home because that would “offend her husband’s manhood, for it would demonstrate his inability to provide for her”. Most working-class women who worked after marriage did not work from choice. There were various reasons why they had to work, including unemployed, underemployed or low-paid husbands (Thane, 189). To earn extra money, working-class wives often took in lodgers, cooked food for sale or kept small shops. However, many working-class women saw housewifery as a job and, furthermore, thought that by giving up their job and getting married they for the first time became “free of the control of either parents or employer” and were “in possession of their own lives and homes. Control by the husband was not necessarily or initially comparable” (Thane 195). From a middle-class point of view, the fact that working-class women often had jobs was a sign of moral degradation, which could lead to the destruction of family life. Because these women were not as dependent on men as they should have been, they became a threat to the middle-class values. (Nead 31)

Most of the characters in *Tipping the Velvet* are members of the working class so the fact that Nan and Kitty work the music halls in London, or that Nan visits the music halls and walks the streets of London on her own, or goes to a pub with her female friends, is easier to account for than it would be if the characters belonged to the middle class, for example. After all, the rules as to what working-class women were allowed to do were not as strict as those of the middle class women. Diana Lethaby, on the other hand, is an upper-class lady, which also allows her to do what she wants rather freely despite her sex because she is wealthy and thus in a prestigious position. In other

words, the rules were the strictest for the middle classes – a class that is not so visible in *Tipping the Velvet*.

Also, there was a certain kind of interdependence between the roles of husband and wife within a working-class household although this interdependence was not the same thing as equality (Thane 196). Working-class men often wanted to get married because a practical housewife made their lives much easier (Thane 182). After all, “seasonality, periodic depression, disputes or other hazards” made their work situation rather insecure and stressful (Thane 195). The working-class wife could help her husband and often had a lot of responsibility – like the middle-class wife, she controlled the family’s finances, whether she earned anything herself or not (Stearns 104). This task was essential for the working-class wife because “it reflected her place in the family and determined how well she could carry out her responsibilities” (Stearns 108). Because women were supposed to please their husbands, they often hid the family’s poverty from the husband and initially fed and clothed the husband well and after that saw to the needs of themselves and the many children (Stearns 106).

Even though marriage was the norm, not all Victorian women married or had children. First of all, there was an “imbalance in numbers between the sexes” as there was a surplus of women over men. Emigration was one way of solving this problem but not enough women emigrated to balance the situation. (Abrams and Greenblatt 1872) In addition, some middle-class women possibly chose to remain unmarried because of the constraints that marriage and family caused (Thane 179). Towards the end of the 19th century, divorce also increased and “public discussion and criticism of marriage and the family” emerged (Thane 179 & 181). Furthermore, for the more well-to-do classes, widowhood was a favourable position as it gave the woman “a legal and actual independence, for example over the control of her own property” (Thane 182).

Another interesting point that concerns this study is the fact that many unmarried women had instead long and passionate friendships, which could be interpreted as lesbian relationships. These

friendships could seem innocent but could in reality have been much more because they were “unsupervised by a legal system which made no comment upon lesbianism”. (Thane 187) However, even though not all women wanted to get married, “marriage and the family were produced as the norm and all other categories were defined in terms of their deviation from this norm” (Nead 35).

For Victorians, it was important to differentiate between “active, aggressive and spontaneous” male sexuality and “weak, passive and responsive” female sexuality, which can be seen in the double standards that existed in connection to the assumed different sexualities (Nead 6). As Nead (6) explains, the concept of double standard “refers to a code of sexual mores which condones sexual activity in men as a sign of ‘masculinity’ whilst condemning it in women as a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour”. For men, it was acceptable to be unfaithful while at the same time “female chastity and fidelity constituted acclaimed public truths” (Hoppen 322). Female chastity was especially important for the middle classes and it was closely associated with the ideology of home and marriage. The family for the middle classes represented order, and female sexual purity and moral ensured that the home remained “a source of social stability” (Nead 34). Deviant feminine behaviour was defined in relation to these ideals of a stable and respectable family. The prostitute, then, with her unfeminine and disorderly sexual behaviour, posed a threat to the traditional domestic order (Nead 34). The sexual behaviour of the lesbian women in *Tipping the Velvet* does not correspond with the Victorian views on female sexuality as very passive and restrained. Instead, the characters have rather active and even ferocious sex lives, and completely without men.

Prostitution was common in the Victorian era, especially because of poverty. For many otherwise respectable women, prostitution was simply the only way of earning a living and surviving. After all, the working-class women who worked as prostitutes often had many children that they had to feed and clothe and there simply were not ways of earning enough money

otherwise. Hoppen (322) points out that for many, prostitution was only “a passing phase which in no permanent way separated them from the bulk of the working-class community”.

Arguments were made by medical experts, stating that “whereas men had strong sexual drives, ‘normal’ women did not” (Hoppen 322). In other words, prostitutes were not considered ‘normal’ but rather abnormal and deviant compared to how women should behave sexually. Also, attempts to control prostitution did not concentrate on the reason why women were forced into selling themselves in the streets, namely poverty. Instead, the main concern was venereal diseases that were commonly associated with prostitution (Thane 185). In other words, prostitutes were thought to be able to contaminate both the minds and the concrete bodies of respectable people with their supposedly abnormal behaviour. It is interesting that even though prostitution threatened the middle-class ideals of female sexuality and family life, it was the middle-class men that at the same time kept it alive with their frequent visits to prostitutes and brothels.

In conclusion, female sexuality of the Victorian era was based on the dichotomy madonna/whore, and a woman’s sexual identity determined if she could be considered respectable or not. As Nead (6) puts it, “throughout the nineteenth century the differences between the ‘respectable’ and the ‘fallen’ were defined and redefined in an attempt to create clear moral boundaries and to prevent any possibility of confusion”. Women’s roles were limited to those of mother and prostitute and these two extreme ends were the only female identities there could be from a patriarchal point of view.

When it comes to homosexuality in the Victorian era, it is important to note the emergence of sexology and its effect on views on homosexuality in the late 19th century. Before sexology emerged to define sexuality and its acceptable forms, lesbian and gay identities had not been acknowledged. Kekki (21) points out that Michel Foucault has argued in his *History of Sexuality* that, instead of being considered part of a person’s identity, same-sex sexual practices were seen merely as pathological acts. Now, however, sexologists “explained homosexuality as the incurable

characteristic of a fixed minority” (Gowing 60). In other words, there was a shift from criminological discourse to medical discourse, and sexual acts were transformed “into stable notions of identity” (Halberstam 1998, 75).

This brought changes in punishments for male homosexuality. Earlier, the punishment for sodomy was death penalty, which was lifted in 1861 to be replaced by lengthy imprisonment (Hughes 40). However, with the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, not only public but also private male homosexual activity was penalised (Thane 186). The penalty for “acts of gross indecency between men” was now “two years’ hard labor” (Hughes 40). For example Oscar Wilde was prosecuted under this law (Thane 186). Lesbian women, on the other hand, “were exempted from prosecution” because they were not considered “as socially dangerous as male homosexuals” and because they were relatively invisible (Hughes 40).

As I mentioned in the introduction, lesbian scholarship has usually defined 19th-century and early 20th-century same-sex desire in terms of either romantic friendship or mannish identification (Halberstam 1998, 50). However, as Halberstam (1998, 50) explains, it is probable that “many other models existed beyond the either-or proposition of an asexual friendship or a butch-femme sexual dynamic”. Also, even though today we often use the word “lesbian” to refer to any same-sex desire between women, in the 19th century there were several different terms that each had their own connotations. By using “lesbian” as an umbrella term for all sexual activities between women, Halberstam (1998, 51) argues, we erase “the specificity of tribadism, hermaphroditism, and transvestism”, to name some examples, and “make lesbianism into the history of so-called women-identified women”, ignoring the history of masculine women.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam (1998, 51) presents some terms that were used to refer to different kinds of lesbian identities in the 19th century. Most importantly, the word “tommy”, or “tom”, was used of the masculine female. “Tom” is also the term that the protagonist uses of herself and those like her in *Tipping the Velvet*. Halberstam (1998, 51) quotes Emma Donoghue, who in her

book *Passions between Women* notes: “By the mid nineteenth century, ‘tom’ meant ‘a masculine woman of the town’ or prostitute; by the 1880’s it referred to a woman ‘who does not care for the society of other than her own sex’”. Thus, there was also a certain connection between the masculine woman and the prostitute, probably having to do with their supposedly bad marriageability. Both were seen as socially threatening because of their queer desires and ways of living. By the end of the 19th century, however, “tomness” came to refer exclusively to lesbians or inverts (Halberstam 1998, 52). The word *invert* was often used of masculine lesbians and it was defined by Havelock Ellis at the end of the 19th century as a “genetically anomalous” woman who supposedly suffered from an anomaly of the genital organs, which then led to her outward masculinity as well (Garber 139).

Furthermore, the words tribade, hermaphrodite, romantic friend, Sapphist and female husband all had their separate connotations (Halberstam 1998, 51-52). Thus, it can be said that 19th century lesbianism was not a uniform phenomenon but rather divided into different ways of expressing and living out same-sex desire. In the following chapter I will further examine female masculinity and lesbianism in *Tipping the Velvet* and see in what ways they have been depicted in the novel.

3. Towards Lesbian Identity: Female Masculinity

The aim of this chapter is to examine female masculinity and its many dimensions in *Tipping the Velvet*. Because female masculinity in the novel is most closely connected with the character of Nan, she will be the main focus of this chapter although the character of Kitty will also be analysed in relation to female masculinity and theatrical performance. This chapter will be divided into three subchapters, all discussing female masculinity from a different perspective. The first subchapter will concentrate on female masculinity as a theatrical performance; the second will deal with passing and posing as man; and, finally, female masculinity as a certain kind of lesbian identity will be discussed. All of the female masculinities present in the novel will, furthermore, be connected to lesbianism and Nan's search for her lesbian identity in particular.

3.1 Theatrical Performance

In the Victorian era, masculinity was not a desirable or acceptable feature in a woman. Instead, as noted in the theory chapter, women were supposed to be respectably feminine, chaste and pure, and stay in the private sphere of the home taking care of the family. However, in 19th-century theatre, theatrical female masculinity was a common and even popular phenomenon. As Halberstam (1998, 233) points out, women typically played young boys in plays on the Victorian stage. Because of their size and feminine voice, women were considered better suited for these roles than grown men.

Furthermore, male impersonating was a popular turn in 19th-century music halls. Music halls emerged in England in the 1850s when regular theatres started to become more respectable and thus not affordable enough for the lower classes. The music hall audiences, then, consisted predominantly of people from working and lower middle class. (Hoppen 365) According to Halberstam (1998, 232), male impersonation as a theatrical genre has existed for two hundred years or more, and the main idea of the impersonating act is to "produce a plausible performance of maleness". As opposed to this, the more recent phenomenon of the drag king aims to expose "the

theatricality of masculinity” through performance (*ibid.*). Because *Tipping the Velvet* is a postmodern Victorian novel, the reader needs to bear in mind that the descriptions of impersonating acts in it are not authentic. Instead, it is likely that Waters has combined elements of both 19th-century impersonating acts as well as the more recent drag king performances in describing Nan and Kitty’s male impersonating. Nevertheless, the two terms are not completely synonymous although they do have much in common. However, despite the definition of male impersonating Halberstam offers, the meaning of male impersonating in the 19th century was not to produce too plausible a mimicry of maleness. Instead, boyish women were often assigned with so called “boy” roles where they “represented an immature masculine subject” (Halberstam 1998, 233). Overt mannishness was not encouraged – in fact “the trouser role” was often used to actually emphasize femininity. Mature masculinity, then, remained “an authentic property of adult male bodies” (*ibid.*).

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan and Kitty work as male impersonators, or mashers, in the music halls of 19th-century London. In this subchapter I intend to take a closer look at how female masculinity as theatrical performance is presented in the novel and, furthermore, how it can be connected to lesbianism. I will do this by analysing the different aspects of Nan and Kitty’s impersonating acts and see in what ways masculinity is produced and performed in the novel.

One of the most important things when creating an authentic masculine impression for a masher performance is of course appearance. As I already pointed out in my theory, role-playing, disguise and costume are essential elements within the context of theatre (Garber 29). Therefore, the clothes and hair on the male impersonator have to correspond with the gender being impersonated as well. In *Tipping the Velvet* great attention is paid to all these different aspects of Nan and Kitty’s stage looks. At the beginning of the novel, Nan is in the role of the spectator and the focus is on Kitty, who is the one with the male impersonating act at the Canterbury Palace where Nan goes every week. The Canterbury Palace is, in Nan’s words, “a small and, I suspect, a rather shabby theatre” that has “the scent of wood and grease-paint and spilling beer, or gas and of tobacco and of hair-oil,

all combined” (Waters 6) and it is very significantly a place of relaxation and fun for the working-class people of the small towns and villages near Canterbury. Kitty’s solo performance at the Palace is relatively simple and she only has one suit that she wears throughout her act every night. Despite this, the one suit is very detailed to create an authentic air:

Kitty Butler did not wear tights or spangles. She was, as Tricky had billed her, a kind of perfect West-End swell. She wore a suit – a handsome gentleman’s suit, cut to her size, and lined at the cuffs and the flaps with flashing silk. There was a rose in her lapel, and lavender gloves at her pocket. From beneath her waistcoat shone a stiff-fronted shirt of snowy white, with a stand up collar two inches high. Around the collar was a white bow-tie; and on her head there was a topper. (Waters 12)

Furthermore, when Nan goes to see Kitty’s performance for the second time, she pays more attention to “all the lovely details of her costume – the watch-chain, looped across the buttons of her waistcoat, the silver links that fastened her cuffs” (Waters 17). As can be seen in the extract above as well as the quote following it, Kitty’s costume is extremely stylised from the suit itself to her gloves, tie, hat, watch-chain and the rose attached to her coat. It is obvious that the kind of man she is impersonating is an upper-class gentleman instead of a working-class or a middle-class man. Perhaps the reason for this is the need for the working classes to ridicule the rich and extravagant upper classes and their idle and perhaps even vain way of life. This also reflects the power relations between different classes in 19th century England. Furthermore, Kitty’s suit is cut to fit a woman as opposed to being in men’s size to avoid creating a comical impression. Instead, the idea is that when Kitty enters the stage, the audience will be confused and forced to observe the act closely in order to be able to decide whether the person in front of them is actually male or female. Furthermore, because of the feminine aspects of Kitty’s costume, it could also be argued that she is impersonating an upper-class dandy, an effeminate man.

Later on Kitty’s act is moved to London and Nan follows her there as her dresser. Kitty’s repertoire is also broadened and now her planned costumes include “a policeman’s jacket”, “a sailor’s blouse”, “peg-top trousers” and “a pearly coat” (Waters 83). Thus, the masculine roles she

performs are suddenly quite many. However, despite the efforts, the act is not particularly successful in the London halls as “male impersonation – once as specialised as plate-spinning – had suddenly, inexplicably, become a cruelly overworked routine” (Waters 87). Kitty’s manager, Walter, then comes up with the idea of a double act to make both Kitty and Nan famous:

“How long have we been looking for something that will lift the act above the ordinary, and make it really memorable? This is it! A *double* act! A soldier – and his comrade! A swell – together with his chum! Above all: *two* lovely girls in trousers instead of one! When did you ever see the like of it before? It will be a sensation!” (Waters 112, italics in the original)

Thus, it is agreed that two mashers are better than one, and Nan joins Kitty’s act. On stage they sing songs, dance and flirt with the women in the audience, just as Kitty did in her solo performance. As a result of Nan joining the act, new matching costumes are tailored for both Nan and Kitty. When in her solo performance Kitty initially impersonated a West-End gentleman, Nan and Kitty’s double act sees different masculine roles performed on stage. They dress, for example, in guardsmen’s uniforms including “red jackets and caps, white belts” and “black trousers” (Waters 139), as well as “Oxford bags and boaters” (Waters 140). In this way, the take on masculinity is developed and taken on another level. Through these different roles Nan and Kitty’s performance presents a wide-ranging view on masculinity. The new roles stretch beyond upper-class masculinities and bring working-class masculinities on stage as well. It seems that, at least in this postmodern Victorian text, it is acceptable to mock both the upper and the lower classes while middle-class masculinities remain untouched. Perhaps this is because it was precisely the middle-class values that were dominant in the 19th century and thus mocking these values might have caused trouble for the impersonators.

In addition to actual clothes, hair can also be considered part of a theatrical costume. Hence, in the novel, Nan and Kitty’s hair is cropped short in a masculine style. Kitty’s hair “fitted her head like a little cap that had been sewn, just for her, by some nimble-fingered milliner” (Waters 13). When Nan joins the act, her hair, too, is cut short. Even though short hair was not acceptable or at

least desirable on women in the Victorian era, the masher performance is considered so important that even the hair has to be masculine in order for the act to seem convincing enough.

In addition to Nan and Kitty's appearances, their gestures and manners need to be as authentically masculine as possible for the performance. As I mentioned in the theory part, Butler (1999, 173) argues that when gender identification is considered enactable, it is still important to achieve coherence; in other words, to reproduce a convincing version of that which is enacted. Butler (*ibid.*) mentions that when performing for example masculinity, certain gestures, acts and desires typically associated with masculinity can be used to achieve this kind of coherence. This is the case in *Tipping the Velvet*, as Jeremiah (137) also points out. When Kitty and Nan have moved to London, Kitty's manager Walter makes the girls "go about the city and *study the men*" (Waters 83, italics in the original):

‘*Scrutinise ‘em!*’ said Mr Bliss, sawing at a piece of cutlet. ‘Catch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits. What are their histories? What are their secrets? Have they ambitions? Have they hopes and dreams? Have they sweethearts they have lost? Or have they only aching feet, and empty bellies?’ He waved his fork. ‘You must know it; and you must copy them, and make your audience know it in their turn.’ (Waters 83, italics in the original)

As can be seen from the extract above, the novel suggests that it is possible to study masculinity in the streets and then transfer it into a theatrical act (Jeremiah 137). Because it is possible to thus take masculinity from men and have a woman reproduce it, the novel seems to reinforce Butler's views on gender being performative instead of being a fixed category that can only be attached to the corresponding sex. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the male impersonating act is based on elements taken from the typical behaviour of male sexed bodies and thus the impression of masculinity can also be created by a woman.

Finally, to complete the male impersonating act, Kitty and Nan need stage names to suit their performance. Kitty goes by the name of Kitty Butler and Nan's name is changed to Nan King when she joins Kitty on stage. The names are rather interesting as they seem to refer quite literally to Judith Butler who introduced the notion of gender performativity into queer studies. Kitty carries

Judith Butler's last name while Nan's last name can be considered to refer to *drag* kings – drag being one example of gender performativity presented by Judith Butler (my italics). On another level, the last names refer to professions or roles traditionally reserved for men – butler and king, representing lower classes and upper classes, respectively. Furthermore, in slang, according to Green, the word “kitty” has the meaning of “the vagina” while, according to Aytō and Simpson, the word “nancy” refers to “an effeminate man or boy” as well as “a male homosexual”. In their part, then, these names further reinforce the complexity of Kitty and Nan's gender portrayal.

In the performance itself, Kitty and Nan sing songs that are meant to be sung either by men to women or by a group of men when, for example, drinking or otherwise having a good time in exclusively male company. Some of the songs are, for example, called ‘Drink Up, Boys!’ and ‘Sweethearts and Wives’, which clearly reinforce the masculine role played by Kitty and Nan as the song lyrics either exclude women completely or see them as the object of a man's love and desire. The songs are taken even further in Kitty's solo performance when Kitty, accordingly to the lyrics, throws a rose to the prettiest girl in the audience every night. The gesture further reinforces the maleness of the act because supposedly in the audience's mind only men can give women flowers. At the same time, the performance allows Nan and Kitty to openly flirt with their female audience when such behaviour between two women would certainly have been frowned upon outside the theatre.

Kitty and Nan's audience consists of male and female working-class music hall goers. However, this does not mean that the audience is homogeneous. Instead, several different kinds of audiences can be pointed out among the many spectators of the impersonating act. First of all, it seems that two women in masculine outfits arouse the interest of the straight male audience. As Nan explains, “the sight of a *pair* of girls in gentlemen's suits was somehow more charming, more thrilling, more indefinably *saucy*, than that of a single girl in trousers and topper and spats” (Waters 125-126, italics in the original). Because in the 19th century women were not allowed to show their sexual

interest in other women in public, if at all, it is clear that this sauciness refers to the straight male audience's feelings. If the straight men in the novel are indeed sexually excited by two mashers in one performance, then it is possible to make a comparison between the novel and the contemporary phenomenon of "lesbian" pornography meant for male titillation. Similarly to the "lesbians" of contemporary pornographic material, Nan and Kitty are the objects of male desire. In fact, Nan and Kitty even *need* to maintain the interest of straight men in order to hide their own sexual interest in women. Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Nan and Kitty have been certain kind of icons among their lesbian audience even though they have never been openly lesbian or "tommish" during their music hall career. In other words, their masculinity interests other "toms" and, as a result, they have a keen lesbian following in addition to their straight audience. They also receive letters from their female fans, some of whom Nan suspects of being toms as well:

But for every ten or twenty of such girls, there would be one or two more desperate and more pushing, or more shy and awkward, than the rest; and in them, I recognised a certain – something. I could not put a name to it, only knew that it was there, and that it made their interest in me rather special. These girls sent letters – letters, like their stage door manners, full of curious excesses or ellipses; letters that awed, repelled and drew me, all at once. 'I hope you will forgive my writing to say that you are very handsome,' wrote one girl; another wrote: 'Miss King, I am in love with you!' Someone named Ada King wrote to ask if we were cousins. She said: 'I do so admire you and Miss Butler, but especially you. Could you I wonder send a photograph? I *would* like to have a picture of you, beside my bed...' (Waters 128-129, italics in the original)

It seems that these girls are interested in Nan and Kitty as more than just idols. Nan wonders if these girls know why they look at other girls and if, when they look at Nan on stage, they see "that – something – that I saw in them?" (Waters 129). Nan and Kitty's secret lesbian audience also resembles a contemporary phenomenon as nowadays it is common for certain TV shows to have a lesbian following even if the TV shows in question are not necessarily aimed for lesbians in particular. One such TV show is *Xena*, and different crime series, such as *Cold Case* and all the versions of *CSI* are another typical example. The lesbian watchers read lesbianism into the female characters of these series, and it seems the lesbian audience in *Tipping the Velvet* does the same with Nan and Kitty. Finally, a third audience for the performances in *Tipping the Velvet* is provided

by us, the contemporary readers of the novel. We can read the performances as manifestations of gender ambiguity and analyse them from a contemporary perspective with the help of queer theory.

Moreover, the male impersonating act in the 19th century was not supposed to be overtly mannish, as Halberstam (1998, 233) pointed out, but instead, it was perhaps even recommendable to emphasise femininity in the performance. After all, women behaving in a masculine or at least untypically feminine way, like prostitutes or tommies, were considered threatening in the Victorian age. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the typical masher acts of the late 1880s are described as being very feminine indeed. Nan for example remembers Nelly Power who performed ‘The Last of the Dandies’ in “tights and bullion fringe, just like a ballet-girl – only carried a cane and a billycock hat to make her boyish” (Waters 12). Compared to this, then, Nan and Kitty’s act is quite revolutionary because when they perform, it is much harder to tell at a first glance whether they are young boys or young women. For example, on stage, Kitty “strode like a boy, and stood like one, with her feet far apart and her hands thrust carelessly into her trouser pockets, and her head at an arrogant angle, at the very front of the stage; and when she sang, her voice was a boy’s voice” (Waters 13). In short, masculinity is taken quite far in Nan and Kitty’s impersonation. Despite this, the audience’s reactions to the performance are excited and positive. For example, after Nan and Kitty’s first performance together, “there were claps, and friendly shouts; there was a rising hum of expectant pleasure as we worked towards our chorus; there was, finally, a bubbling cascade of cheers and laughter from gallery to pit” (Waters 122). It is of course difficult to know what real 19th-century music hall audiences would have thought of Nan and Kitty’s performances but judging from what we know about Victorian values concerning women and their place and preferred gender expression, they might have been too daring. Then again, music hall audiences consisted of working-class people whose values were slightly different from the dominant middle-class values. Therefore, the reactions might also have been accepting.

However, despite the fact that the performance is quite daring, even Nan and Kitty's act is not supposed to be too authentic. Maleness is exaggerated on stage to produce a somewhat humorous effect rather than to pass as man altogether. After all, the purpose of the music hall was to entertain people, and the entertainment in male impersonation came from the fact that it was considered funny to see women clad as men and in so doing perhaps also mock masculinity in a light-hearted way. In other words, the masculinity in women was not supposed to be too hard. Hence, Kitty and Nan's lips are carmined, their lashes are blackened with spit-black and they wear high-heeled shoes. Furthermore, even though for example Kitty's figure is "boy-like and slender", at the same time it is "rounded, vaguely but unmistakably, at the bosom, the stomach, and the hips, in a way no real boy's ever was" (Waters 13). The hints towards femininity in Kitty and Nan's performance are made subtle – the performance is supposed to convey masculinity in a plausible way but at the same time it has to be possible to point out the impersonators' femaleness. Too real a performance would be unacceptable because Victorian women were not supposed to be masculine. As Halberstam (1998, 233) pointed out, mature masculinity was only to be attached to adult male bodies.

What causes problems with regard to overt masculinity being unacceptable in male impersonating in the novel is Nan's apparent masculinity. When Kitty was "born to play the boy", Nan clad as a boy "looks like a *real* boy", which "ain't quite the idea now, is it?", as Nan and Kitty's landlady Mrs Dendy points out (Waters 118, italics in the original). When Nan's hair is cut short and she is dressed up in men's clothing, all of her femininity disappears and her masculinity becomes apparent. "Her face and her figure and her bearing on her feet" are all too real (Waters 118). This is problematic in the novel as because Nan *is* masculine, it is difficult for her to *perform* masculinity. Her appearance seems too masculine and therefore it is also considered unappealing and unsuitable for the performance. After all, the purpose is not to convey female masculinity or lesbianism but instead parody male masculinity. Therefore, Nan's costume and looks need to be altered in order for her appearance not to be too threatening. Walter changes her shoes, shortens her

trousers, tightens her jacket to draw attention to the fact that Nan has hips and a bosom, and he also applies make-up on her. As a result, Nan's looks become softer and more feminine and she is evaluated to look perfect for the act (Waters 119-120). Hence, the purpose is not to make men out of women but to entertain and create a comical effect for the audience at the show.

Yet another thing that emphasises the fact that masculinity is only acceptable in a woman on stage as a performance is the fact that Nan and Kitty dress up exclusively in women's clothing when off stage. Even the cropped hair needs to be disguised with a false plait. This contrast between the performance and every-day life draws further attention to the fact that masculinity is indeed just a performance not to be mixed with reality. On the other hand, it proves that gender can also be produced the other way round – when masculinity can be created for the performance with the help of clothes, hair and gestures, similarly dresses, false plaits and feminine gestures can be used to create femininity. Because it is possible to thus create both genders and juggle back and forth with them like Nan and Kitty do, the importance of an “original” gender is questioned. Indeed, gender in itself does not seem to have limits in *Tipping the Velvet* – it is society that reinforces the fact that gender has to result from the corresponding sex because society does not accept masculinity in women, or, similarly, effeminacy in men. This is in agreement with what Butler (1999, 24) says about normative heterosexuality: it is the institution requiring that gender and desire be the result of the corresponding sex in order to reinforce the role of heterosexuality as the societal norm.

Furthermore, while masculinity is a performance on stage in the first part of *Tipping the Velvet*, it also has another role. Theatrical female masculinity is a way of allowing Nan to acquaint herself with her awakening sexual identity as what we would now perceive as a lesbian. Nan can identify with the exaggerated masculinity of the masher performance, and the masher performance also opens her eyes to the existence of female masculinity in the first place, even though in her mind Nan does not yet necessarily connect female masculinity with tommishness.

When Nan first sees Kitty's solo performance in Canterbury, she falls in love with Kitty because Kitty's masculinity arouses new feelings in her. Especially Kitty's short hair draws Nan's attention and makes her interested: "When she turned her head a little to put her hat back on, I saw a strip of pale flesh at the nape of her neck where the collar ended and the hairline began that – for all the fire of the hot, hot hall – made me shiver" (Waters 13). Later on Nan becomes Kitty's friend and dresser, and whenever she sees Kitty in her dressing room, in women's clothing, she is disappointed: "Every time she stepped from behind the screen, clad as a girl, small and slim and shapely, a false plait smothering the lovely, ragged edges of her crop, I had the same sensation: a pang of disappointment and regret" (Waters 12-13). Similarly, when Kitty visits Nan and her family in Whitstable, Nan is not pleased to see her dressed up in feminine clothes: "I had hardly expected Kitty to swagger to Whitstable in her suit and her topper and her lavender gloves; but even so, when she stepped from the train and I saw that she was clad as a girl, and walked like a girl, with her plait fastened to the back of her head and a parasol over her arm, I felt a little pang of disappointment" (Waters 45-46). Even though the feeling of disappointment always turns into "pleasure and to aching love; a desire to touch, to embrace and caress, so strong I had to turn aside or fold my arms for fear that they would fly about her and press her close" (Waters 37), it is the masculine features, not the femininity in Kitty that makes Nan want her. Kitty is the first person Nan sees female masculinity in and it opens her eyes to whole new dimensions of gender and sexuality. She is extremely intrigued by Kitty's hair and masculine stage look, and it is indeed the masculinity in Kitty's performance that first awakens Nan's lesbian identity and interest in women.

Furthermore, theatre allows Nan to explore her sexuality. In the 19th century the urban space was essentially male, and therefore there were few so called lesbian spaces where it was possible for lesbian women, or tommies, to spend time with other tommies. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the artsy world of the theatre provides one such lesbian space. In addition to Nan and Kitty, there are other lesbians among the performing artists, too – "a comic singer and her dresser", for example (Waters

129). This couple also seems to be openly lesbian and has a circle of lesbian friends, also from the theatre but not referred to in detail. However, Nan and Kitty are not in further contact with this lesbian couple because Kitty wants to hide her sexual identity for fear of losing her job. Nevertheless, it seems that, in the novel, Nan and Kitty are not the only lesbians working in the theatre.

Ciocia points out that in real life Nan has to hide her lesbian identity as unacceptable but on stage it is possible for her to express it. As mentioned earlier, female masculinity and lesbianism were not particularly desirable in the Victorian age because they were seen as socially threatening. Within the context of the music hall and in the masher performance, however, Nan can acceptably be masculine and at the same time slowly get in touch with her masculine lesbian identity. Hence, the masculine costume functions as a theatrical disguise but also as a way for Nan to experiment with her sexual identity in a public space in front of an audience. Paradoxically, and ironically, then, the theatrical *disguise* allows Nan to actually reveal who she *really* is to an audience consisting of people most of whom would probably not accept female masculinity and lesbianism outside the theatre and the light-hearted performance.

Nan comes to terms with her sexual identity more and more with every little detail having to do with the masher performance. Most importantly, Nan finds wearing men's clothing sexually exciting. When she first tries Kitty's trousers on, she feels "as though I had never had legs before – or, rather, that I had never known, quite, what it really felt like to have *two* legs, joined at the top" (Waters 114, italics in the original). This is what many women in the 19th century might have felt like had they suddenly dressed up in trousers after always wearing dresses. However, what adds more to Nan's experience in trousers is that when clad in men's clothing, Nan's sexual needs towards Kitty grow stronger. To Nan, "there was something rather thrilling about embracing her [Kitty], in such a costume, with Walter so near and unknowing", and she wonders how Kitty can perform in such clothes every evening without feeling "queer" (Waters 114). Nan feels that if she

was beside Kitty in trousers, “oh Kitty, I don’t think I should be able to keep from kissing you!” (Waters 114). Therefore, there is a clear connection between masculine clothing and Nan’s lesbian desires – when at first she was interested in Kitty because of Kitty’s masculine appearances, now she is turning more masculine herself, and her own lesbian identity and desires become even more obvious to her. Similarly, when Nan has her hair cut short for the double act with Kitty and the hairdresser warns her not to be shocked at her new looks, Nan, rather than being shocked, is happy about the transformation in her. When Nan sees herself, she blushes and the hairdresser thinks it is because she is indeed shocked. Nan does not say anything but it is revealed that she “had blushed because my new, shorn head, my naked neck, felt saucy” and “just as I had done when I first pulled on a pair of trousers – I had felt myself stir, and grow warm, and want Kitty. Indeed, I seemed to want her more and more, the further into boyishness I ventured” (Waters 124). Therefore, it can be said that the masculine outfits and hair that Nan wears for her stage performance are connected with her sexual identity as the deeper into female masculinity she goes, the better she feels about her desires towards another woman.

Furthermore, Nan becomes more confident as a person the better she acquaints herself with her masculinity. As mentioned earlier, at first Nan falls in love with the masculinity in Kitty and, as a result, with Kitty herself as well, but now that she, too, wears masculine clothes and has short hair, she starts to like herself more as well: “I could not help it: I had fallen in love with Kitty; now, *becoming* Kitty, I fell in love a little with myself. I admired my hair, so neat and so sleek. I adored my legs – my legs which, while they had had skirts about them, I had scarcely had a thought for; but which were, I discovered, rather long and lean and shapely” (Waters 126, italics in the original). In addition, when Nan starts performing on stage with Kitty, she quickly finds out something about herself that leaves her transformed forever: “The truth was this: that whatever successes I might achieve as a girl, they would be nothing compared to the triumphs I should enjoy clad, however girlishly, as a boy. I had, in short, found my vocation” (Waters 123). In other words, Nan feels like

being boyish comes naturally to her, and it is the masher performance that enables her to find this out about herself since female masculinity was not otherwise acceptable in the Victorian era.

Also, the music hall offers Nan a relatively safe environment to explore her sexual identity. Because women were supposed to be feminine in the 19th century, Nan's masculinity would not necessarily receive a welcoming reaction in real life. As opposed to this, in the music hall people actually want to see male impersonating. Therefore, the male impersonating act guarantees Nan a safe way to first explore her sexual identity through performing masculinity instead of having to actually be masculine or come out as a masculine woman when she has only just started to come to terms with her sexual identity in the first place. The performance functions as Nan's veil that allows her to feel satisfied and complete in front of an audience full of people that otherwise might not accept Nan the way she is.

However, when Nan and Kitty are exposed as, or, rather, insinuated to be, toms, they are not as safe anymore. There is an incident where a man in the audience actually calls Nan and Kitty "a couple of *toms!*" when Nan and Kitty are late and the audience is frustrated after having to wait for them to arrive (Waters 140, italics in the original). At the man's remark, the audience gives "a great collective flinch" and grows "self-conscious and appalled" (Waters 141). Therefore, it seems that, for the Victorian music hall audience, the male costume and male impersonating performance "signifies a lesbian identity" after all (Wilson 298), at least to an extent, because even if the man in the audience most likely does not mean what he says as anything more than an insult because he is annoyed after having to wait so long for the turn he has wanted to see, it still seems easy for him to come up with this particular insult to upset the girls. Also, when the man voices his opinion, the rest of the audience see Nan and Kitty in a different light even though most of them have obviously never connected male impersonating acts with tommishness before. Hence, Nan and Kitty are completely safe in their theatrical performance of masculinity only as long as their audience does not connect their act with what we now would define as lesbianism. Since lesbianism, or

tommishness, in the Victorian era is not acceptable, it is important to keep any same-sex desire a secret in order to avoid reactions like this.

According to Halberstam (1998, 233), some 19th-century male impersonators actually did carry over “their cross-dressing practices into their everyday lives”, which suggests that “their relation to masculinity extended far beyond theatricality”, just like Nan’s even though in the first part of the novel she is still hesitant to actually do that. In the next subchapter I will take a closer look at Nan’s passing and posing as man in the second part of the novel and see how those two phenomena are connected to her lesbian identity.

3.2 Passing and Posing as Man

As I pointed out in my theory section, cross-dressing refers to the phenomenon of dressing up in the clothes of the opposite sex, whether male-to-female or female-to-male. As Garber (14) explains, people can cross-dress for various reasons. Some cross-dressers are interested in either female or male impersonating while others want to pass as the opposite sex. Also, especially in relation to lesbianism, the roles of butch and femme often play with masculinity and femininity through dress. The phenomenon of passing is closely related to cross-dressing, and it is also present throughout the second part of *Tipping the Velvet* when Nan walks the streets of London disguised as a man. The purpose of this subchapter, then, is to further examine female-to-male passing, its functions, and its connection to Nan’s sexual identity.

In the second part of *Tipping the Velvet*, Kitty has betrayed Nan by agreeing to marry Walter, thus crushing Nan’s hopes of them being a couple anymore. The reason why Kitty wants to marry Walter has to do with her fear of otherwise eventually being exposed as a tom. Her intention is to marry Walter but at the same time continue her relationship to Nan. However, Nan is shocked by this idea and, as a result, she escapes, leaving behind her women’s clothes and wages, but taking her favourite male costumes with her. She finds a room for herself with a landlady called Mrs Best and

stays alone in her room for a long time, depressed and hopeless about her future. When she finally ventures out, she quickly notices what it is like to walk the streets of London alone as a woman: “I was stared at and called after – and twice or thrice seized and stroked and pinched – by men” (Waters 191). Nan is shocked, and concludes that “the stares and the strokings affected me like the curses: they made me shake” (Waters 191). In short, the streets frighten her. It becomes obvious to her that the urban space is reserved for men and that it is difficult and almost impossible for her, as a woman, to gain space in the public sphere because of this. She finds it ironic that “I, who had swaggered so many times in a gentleman’s suit across the stages of London, should now be afraid to walk upon its streets, because of my own girlishness” (Waters 191). It is this thought that leads Nan to think of actually dressing up as a boy again and thus trying to walk the streets of London, unnoticed and in peace. Eventually she also becomes a renter, selling sexual favours to men in Leicester Square, disguised as a man herself.

Hence, the first reason for Nan’s passing as a man stems from the fact that walking the streets of Victorian London is not suitable for a solitary Victorian woman. Because Nan regardless of this unspoken rule feels the need to go out and explore the city on her own, the male disguise grants her more space and freedom of mobility than she would be able to experience as a woman. The urban space is thus quite clearly gendered, shutting women outside men’s affairs, and a woman wanting to be included in this space needs to masquerade herself in order to be able to move freely in the streets. As Whittle (126) mentions, the cross-dresser becomes hidden in passing, and in this case hiding her femaleness is of use to Nan as when dressed up as a man, she is accordingly treated as a man and, as a result, with respect instead of being pinched and grabbed all the time. Walking the streets alone as a woman was considered improper in the 19th century - after all, the only women moving freely in the streets were prostitutes - , and dressing up and passing as male makes Nan more accepted because when everyone thinks she is a man, it is much easier for her to access certain places, and she is no longer laughed at or harassed when walking around on her own. Thus,

it can be said that one reason for Nan's passing has to do with surviving in the public sphere that was quite clearly reserved for men in the 19th century. According to Epstein Nord (241), in the Victorian age "gender disguise might provide an exhilarating sense of invisibility, interrupt the circuit of objectification, and deflect the attention habitually attracted by a lone female in a public place". All of this is true of Nan's cross-dressing.

There is a similar character in another novel by Waters, *The Night Watch* (2006), which takes place in London in the 1940s. In *The Night Watch* there is a lesbian called Kay, who also wanders the streets of London alone at night, dressed up in masculine outfits and sporting a cropped hairstyle. While her intention is not to pass – she has worked as an ambulance driver on the night watch during the London bombings and now, after the war, enjoys the quiet nights – she is often mistaken for a man.

In addition to disguising herself in order to be able to move around more freely, another reason for Nan's passing becomes obvious in the following: when dressed up as a man to pass, Nan is happy because now "anyone – even Kitty herself! – might meet me on the streets of London, and never know me for a girl, at all" (Waters 192). In other words, in addition to wanting to hide her femaleness from men to be able to move around more freely, it is important to Nan to also hide herself from Kitty. She is extremely hurt by Kitty's decision to marry Walter and leave her behind and so she wants to protect herself by making sure Kitty does not recognize her if they happen to come across each other in London. Nan also dreams of making Kitty suffer the way she has made her suffer: "If only I could meet Kitty once again, I thought, and woo her as a man – and then reveal myself, to break her heart, as she had broken mine" (Waters 195). Nan's passing, then, is also her way of protecting herself from the hurt caused by Kitty. At the same time, again, the theme of disguise or masquerade becomes obvious.

Again, it is easy for Nan to make the transformation from woman to man – after all, it became clear already in the first part of the novel that she is "*too much like a boy*" and "*too real*" (Waters

191-192, italics in the original). When in her lodging room, depressed about Kitty's betrayal, Nan stops wearing her false plait and lets her "hair strangle greasily about my ears" (Waters 185). She also becomes "so thin that the trousers sagged about my waist; my hips were narrower, my breasts even shallower, than before" (Waters 192). She draws the conclusion that the only thing spoiling the illusion of her actually being male is the jacket that has been made more feminine to hide her obvious masculinity on stage. She fixes the jacket back to "its old, masculine self" and is sure that once she has trimmed her hair again "anyone – even Kitty herself! – might meet me on the streets of London, and never know me for a girl, at all" (Waters 192). Indeed, when Nan then goes out in her masculine attire, all the time expecting someone to cry "'A girl! There is a girl, here, in boy's clothing!'", no one even suspects her of being cross-dressed as a man (Waters 194):

But the glances did not settle on me: they only slithered past me, to the girls behind. There was no cry, and I began to walk a little straighter. At St Luke's church, on the corner, a man brushed by me with a barrow, calling, 'All right, squire!' Then a woman with a frizzed fringe put her hand upon my arm, and tilted her head and said: 'Well now, pretty boy, you look like a lively one. Fancy payin' a visit, to a nice little place I know...?' (Waters 194)

Nan manages to successfully pass as a man, as can be seen in the extract above. A man greets her as a fellow man and a prostitute sees her as a possible client. Thus, Nan's cross-dressing and passing also bring out the performative nature of gender. Because through dress and behaviour it is possible to, in a way, produce different genders, it becomes apparent that gender cannot be a fixed category. As Garber (133) argues, the cross-dresser can be seen as "the third" that disrupts the harmony of certain seemingly fixed categories, such as male/female, gay/straight and sex/gender. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan's cross-dressing is an example of challenging the notion of "the 'original'", as Garber (16) would put it, because she succeeds in passing as a member of the opposite sex among both men and women.

Hence, also as a passing female-to-male cross-dresser Nan continues to perform. Instead of going about as herself, a masculine lesbian, Nan's "real sexual identity is hidden behind her performance as a boy, an act which keeps on attracting people's attention even as it deceives them"

(Ciocia). Similarly, Wilson (299) points out that Nan “continues to play to an audience as she struggles to negotiate her sexuality”, only this time the audience consists of regular Londoners in the streets as opposed to the audience in the music hall. Wilson (299), furthermore, adds that as Nan works as a rent boy in the streets, wearing her old music hall outfits and pleasing men sexually, “she assumes a variety of roles, each suited to the customer at hand” and thus learns “the role of the rent boy”:

For a week or two I continued to wander, and to watch, and to learn the ways and gestures of the world into which I had stumbled. Walking and watching, indeed, are that world’s keynotes: you walk, and let yourself be looked at; you watch, until you find a face or a figure that you fancy; there is a nod, a wink, a shake of the head, a purposeful stepping to an alley or a rooming-house...(Waters 201)

As Wilson (299) mentions, in this extract it becomes obvious that “these performances are as carefully scripted and choreographed as any of the turns Nan had performed on the music hall stage”. This emphasises the fact that Nan is indeed playing yet another role instead of acting naturally and being herself.

Moreover, what further reinforces the idea of Nan’s cross-dressing and passing as a performance is the fact that Nan indeed craves to have an actual audience for her renting to admire her acting skills:

My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye – just one! – to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (Waters 206)

Nan thinks that she is a remarkable actress because of her successful passing and feels that her performances are going to waste because no one can see them. In a way, then, to Nan, her passing as man is quite similar to her male impersonating performances in the music halls, the only difference being that since now no one knows she is in fact female, she does not receive applause and praise for her performances. As Ciocia points out, when Nan starts to pass as man in the streets, the result is that “the objectifying, threatening male gaze directed at a vulnerable girl has been

neutralised, leaving room to the obvious narcissistic pleasure of the actor, the undetected male impersonator". In other words, as an actor, Nan realises that she is talented and takes pleasure in it, at the same time also craving recognition from others.

Later on when Nan has started to cross-dress on a regular basis, she betters her "impersonation" with "some new trick" every time she goes out:

I called at a barber's shop, and had my old effeminate locks quite clipped away. I bought shoes and socks, singlets and drawers and combinations. I experimented with bandages in an effort to get the subtle curves of my bosom more subtle still, and at my groin I wore a handkerchief or a glove, neatly folded, to simulate the bulges of a modest little cock. (Waters 195)

This extract presents quite a few ways of performing masculinity through appearances: like in theatre, Nan's hair is cut short and she wears men's clothes, but in addition to that she now uses bandages to make her chest seem flat like a man's and also creates the impression of having a penis by rolling up a handkerchief or a glove inside her underwear. This description matches with Garber's (120) observation about "rolled-up socks" in the "inside crotch of you underwear" being a typical way for cross-dressing women to pass for example in the men's room. Thus, creating an illusion of a kind of masculine body is important for a passing female-to-male cross-dresser. This also leads to the so called bathroom problem discussed in the theory section, public bathrooms often being considered the ultimate test for a cross-dresser and their successful passing. Because Nan's landlady Mrs Best would not accept Nan's queer cross-dressing habits, Nan has to think of a place where she can change her clothes before starting her walking in the streets. She mentions that the prostitutes of the Hay Market "transformed themselves in the public lavatories of Piccadilly" but concludes that even though this seems like "a sensible scheme", she could not copy it "since it would blue my project, rather, to be seen emerging from a ladies' lavatory in a suit of serge and velvet and a boater" (Waters 193). In other words, Nan cannot go in the ladies' lavatory as a woman and then come out as a man. This is a typical problem for cross-dressers because public bathrooms are almost always divided to men's bathrooms and women's bathrooms, according to sex. Hence,

one should be either clearly a woman or clearly a man to be allowed to enter. Cross-dressers pose a problem because regardless of their biological sex, they can portray whatever gender they please. To be more exact, cross-dressing has more to do with gender than sex when public bathrooms are based on sex instead of gender. Thus, Nan cannot use ladies' lavatories because her sex does not correspond with the gender she is portraying as a cross-dresser. In the end the problem is solved when Nan finds out she can change her clothes in a house that lets beds by the hour, meant for prostitutes to bring their clients to.

Moreover, the fear of getting caught and being exposed as a cross-dresser is constantly present for Nan. Garber (47) identifies this as "the cultural paranoia of being caught in the ultimately wrong place". First of all, there is the dressing-room problem discussed above, then the fear of being exposed by the men Nan satisfies, and the fear of getting caught by her landlady Mrs Best. Indeed, Nan does get caught by Mrs Best in the end and the result is that when she goes back to her room in her masculine attire, Mrs Best starts to think she is, against her rules, bringing men to her room and kicks her out. Hence, getting caught means trouble and, as a result, a cross-dresser needs to be careful not to expose themselves to the wrong people in the wrong place.

Interestingly, as I already mentioned, Nan's passing as man attracts other men, and because she does not have much money left, she becomes a male prostitute, or a renter, that offers sexual favours to men, who never suspect her of actually being female. This, yet again, confirms her successful passing because even men do not notice that she is not male. Of course, it should be mentioned that Nan only offers handjobs and oral sex to these men so they never actually have the chance to see Nan's body and notice that she is actually female. Nan's renting provides the third reason for her passing: the men Nan chooses to please sexually as a man all resemble Kitty's husband Walter. In her mind, then, Nan is in some way taking revenge on Walter because the men she satisfies want men, but Nan is in fact a woman and the men will never know that. Hence, she

imagines that the men she satisfies are actually Walter, and by pleasing the imaginary Walter disguised as a man she manages to insult and humiliate him on some level.

Also, being a renter and at the same time passing as what we would now perceive as a homosexual man opens Nan's eyes to the existence of homosexuality in London. As no name is used in the novel to refer to the men Nan satisfies apart from expressions like men who "were like the gentleman whose parts I had just fingered" or men "*like that*" (Waters 201, italics in the original), I will use the contemporary term homosexual to refer to them. When Nan realises how difficult it is to be a homosexual man, similarly to how difficult it is to be a lesbian, and have to keep one's sexual identity a secret, she actually feels compassion towards the men she satisfies, even though as a lesbian she is disgusted by the act itself. In other words, she identifies with the men she encounters as a renter:

But he was not like Walter, who might take his pleasure where he chose it. His pleasure had turned, at the last, to a kind of grief; and his love was a love so fierce and so secret it must be satisfied, with a stranger, in a reeking court like this. I knew about that kind of love. I knew how it was to bare your palpitating heart, and be fearful as you did so that the beats should come too loudly, and betray you. (Waters 200)

Nan suddenly realises that the homosexual people of London "out of fear, kept themselves hidden, and only exposed themselves to those upon whose sympathies they could be sure" and she begins to wonder how many of the men she sees in the streets are actually homosexual (Waters 201). After all, she could never know since they would have to act in secret, just like she has to hide her sexual identity and now even her femaleness. She also comes to the conclusion that even though she originally started cross-dressing to avoid men's gazes, she does not mind being gazed by "these men who thought I was like them, *like that*" (Waters 201, italics in the original). Hence, being a renter widens Nan's view of men because she now realises that some men are like her and want their own sex instead of the opposite sex.

However, it is important to note that Nan does not want to be a man despite her cross-dressing and passing. Instead, passing for her is only a temporary solution – she does not intend to live as a

man for the rest of her life unlike some of the real-life cross-dressers that Halberstam and Garber, for example, mention in their studies. It is very clear that Nan's motives for passing have to do with her need to not be found by Kitty or any of the other people from her past in the music halls, and also her need to avoid men's gazes when walking the streets of London on her own. As Nan herself explains, "I could not say that I was happy – you must not think that I was ever *happy*, now" (Waters 195, italics in the original). She furthermore concludes that "London, for all my weeping, could never wash dim; and to walk freely about it at last – to walk as a boy, as a handsome boy in a well-sewn suit, whom the people stared only to envy, never to mock – well, it had a brittle kind of glamour to it, that was all I knew, just then, of satisfaction" (Waters 195). Hence, in Nan's case, the male attire functions most importantly as a disguise. There is a difference between Nan and those women who have married women and joined the army as men and only upon their death been discovered to be women. Nan does not want to deceive women apart from Kitty after her betrayal – she only wants to be left alone and be free to go where she wants. As Epstein Nord (119) points out, this kind of invisibility "was attainable for women on the streets only by altering their external identity".

Moreover, Nan's performance as a boy is so successful that it confuses Nan occasionally. She suspects that the woman who keeps the place where she changes her clothes does not know whether she is "a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock" and concludes that sometimes she was not sure of that herself, either (Waters 195). Similarly, when she needs to find a new place to live after Mrs Best has kicked her out, she sees an advertisement that says a lady is seeking "*Fe-Male Lodger*" (Waters 211, italics in the original). Nan finds the advertisement intriguing because of the word choice "*Fe-Male*" and sees herself in it, "in the hyphen" (Waters 211). In other words, because she performs two different genders on a daily basis, Nan is not sure how she should define her gender anymore as she spends time both as a girl and a boy and, as a result, is a combination of the two. From a queer perspective, we could then

note that defining one's identity becomes difficult because gender and sexual identities are seen as flexible instead of being somehow fixed. Also, Halberstam (1998, 21) argues that in passing "there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully; at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity" and "at such a moment, the passer has *become*" (italics in the original). Nan's confusion about her gender seems to correspond with Halberstam's views as it seems to be difficult for Nan to separate her masculine self from her feminine self after starting to pass as man regularly. Also, this confusion is linked to Nan's past as an oyster girl as earlier on in the novel Nan's father explains to Kitty that "an oyster, you see, is what you might call a real queer fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!" (Waters 49). As Wilson (300) points out, Nan has now quite literally become an "oyster girl", hovering between femininity and masculinity and occasionally being confused as to how she would explain her gender.

However, eventually Nan is exposed as a passing cross-dresser by an upper-class lesbian called Diana Lethaby. Diana sees Nan strolling in the streets in her masculine attire, starts following her in her carriage, stops her and wants her to get in. As a lesbian, she recognises Nan as a masculine woman instead of taking her for a man. In other words, Nan's passing fails to succeed in front of a lesbian who is familiar with female masculinity. Nan becomes Diana's kept woman, lover, or "boy", as she prefers to refer to Nan. This refers to the fact that Diana wants to dress Nan up in different male outfits to please both her and her upper-class lesbian friends and also shock people who are not accustomed to female masculinity. Thus Nan's passing as man is slowly mixed with posing as man among people who know she is in fact female – similarly to her male impersonating act in the music halls. In Ciocia's view, Nan's role as a kept woman with Diana is "configured as a combination of her previous two" roles as a music hall artist and a rent boy because with Diana Nan both continues to perform and, to an extent, pass as a man.

Diana orders expensive outfits for Nan so that she looks different and more intriguing every time she makes an appearance. As Wilson (300) puts it, “Diana exploits Nan”, by putting Nan and her costumes on display for her friends:

I had posed for Maria and Dickie and Evelyn in my trousers with the scorch-mark and my underthings of silk. When they came a second time, with another lady, Diana had me pose for them again in a different suit. After that, it became a kind of sport with her, to put me in a new costume and have me walk before her guests, or among them, filling glasses, lighting cigarettes. (Waters 280)

Later on the posing becomes more serious and planned, and the outfits more theatrical: Diana “grew tired of gentlemen’s suits; she took to displaying me in masquerade – had me set up, behind a little velvet curtain in the drawing-room” (Waters 280). Nan then stands behind the curtain, striking a pose, and when the right moment comes, Diana dramatically uncovers her:

I might be Perseus, with a curved sword and a head of the medusa, and sandals with straps that were buckled at the knee. I might be Cupid, with wings and a bow. I was once St Sebastian tied to a stump – I remember what a job it was to fasten the arrows so they would not droop. (Waters 281)

Thus, as becomes clear from these examples, even though in the private sphere of Diana’s Sapphic household Nan’s “real sexual orientation is allowed to come out in the open” because everyone living in or visiting the mansion is lesbian, Nan still continues to perform (Ciocia). In other words, Nan is again in the role of the performer as opposed to being herself in front of other lesbians. Wilson (300) points out that with Diana, Nan in fact “lives in a state of constant performance” in order to please Diana. Ciocia, similarly, adds that with Diana Nan “is little more than a commodity, a peacock strutting in a golden cage for her mistress’s pleasure”. Thus, even though Nan’s sexual orientation is now clearer, “she is still wearing a different kind of mask” (Ciocia). Nothing much has changed – when her audience consisted of theatre-goers in the music hall and of homosexual men in the streets of London, it now consists of “a restricted, privileged, semi-clandestine circle of aristocratic lesbians” (Ciocia). As Ciocia concludes, “there is always an element of theatricality in what Nancy does”.

Also, when earlier it was stated that the theatre worked as a certain kind of lesbian space, now it is Diana's upper-class home that serves this purpose. Because of her upper-class status and her wealth, Diana is able to turn her home into a place for upper-class lesbians to assemble and be entertained by things such as Nan's posing. Hence, even though this novel was written by a contemporary writer and thus it is not an authentic Victorian text, it can nevertheless be argued that it is likely that not all lesbians in the 19th century gathered in the same places. Instead, class was an important factor that defined the kind of experiences different lesbians had of a lesbian community.

Furthermore, even though Nan's sexual orientation is now exposed in front of Diana's friends, Nan nevertheless does not live completely as herself with Diana. In addition to posing as man in front of Diana's friends, whenever Nan goes somewhere outside Diana's mansion with Diana, Diana presents Nan as "her *boy*" (Waters 278, italics in the original):

For it was always as a boy that I travelled with her now, even when we ventured into the public world, the ordinary world beyond the circle of Cavendish Sapphists, the world of shops and supper-rooms and drives in the park. To anyone who asked after me, she would boldly introduce me as 'my ward, Neville King'; she had several requests for introductions, I believe, from ladies with eligible daughters. (Waters 278-279)

In other words, again, Nan plays the boy-role instead of being herself, and outside the lesbian circles she as a result often passes as man. This time, however, her passing is not her own choice and it is not her intention to pass, but because women in the Victorian age were not supposed to be masculine, people in the streets or other public places do not suspect her of actually being a woman. Even the woman working as a receptionist at the Cavendish Club that Diana and her lesbian friends frequently visit mistakes Nan for a man when they first visit the club even though she is perhaps used to seeing masculine women. Similarly, Nan's old friend Bill from the theatre does not recognise her and calls her "Sir" before Nan reveals herself (Waters 287). Nan is also able to go to the men's lavatory and pass successfully – she even feels "a gent look me over" just like when she was still a renter (Waters 279). Hence, again, Nan's masculine attire can be seen as a disguise. Nan certainly sees it as one as she wonders whether the women at the club have seen through her

“disguise at once” or not (Waters 272). In other words, even though Nan is now part of a lesbian community, she is still not living as herself but even admits to Bill that, instead, she is “living as a boy just now” (Waters 287).

For Diana as an upper-class lady, it is important to look impressive and handsome and perhaps even show off in front of her friends. At the same time, her intention is to shock other people, which her wealth and status enable her to do. Moreover, in a way, Diana’s behaviour resembles that of 19th-century dandies, for example Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde had a young lover called Lord Alfred Douglas, and Diana, similarly, has her own young “boy” Nan. Perhaps, then, one reason why Diana enjoys making Nan pretend to be her ward Neville King is that she derives pleasure from being able to act as some of the upper-class men of the time did.

When living with Diana, Nan for the first time realises that there are other women out there who are like her that are interested in and attracted to women. This realisation is crucial when it comes to Nan coming to terms with and accepting her lesbianism. All of Diana’s servants are lesbians, which amazes Nan because she has never been part of a lesbian community of any kind before. In the following extract, Nan is discussing Diana’s servants with Diana over supper:

‘Didn’t you catch Mrs Hooper, gazing through her lashes at you as she served you your soup? Why, she was practically drooling into your plate!’
 ‘You don’t mean – you can’t mean – that she is just – *like us?*’
 She [Diana] nodded: ‘Of course. And as for little Blake – why, I plucked her, poor child, from a reformatory cell. They had sent her there for corrupting a house-maid...’ (Waters 261, italics in the original)

It is difficult for Nan to actually believe that all the women living with Diana, whether as her cooks and servants like Mrs Hooper and Blake or as her lover like Nan, are lesbians. Up until now Nan has thought that she might be the only lesbian in the world since even Kitty betrayed her by marrying a man. Through Diana Nan becomes one of many lesbians instead of continuing to think she is the only woman who is attracted to other women.

Similarly, Nan, dressed up as a boy, starts to occasionally accompany Diana to the Cavendish Ladies’ Club to meet her lesbian friends. The Cavendish Ladies’ Club provides yet another upper-

class lesbian space in addition to upper-class homes. It is there that Nan for the first time realises that not only are there other lesbians out there but also both other masculine lesbians and lesbians who are attracted to female masculinity. Even though none of the other masculine lesbians at the club are quite as masculine as Nan, and some of the women are even bothered by Nan's overt masculinity, it is still clear that a certain kind of interest in female masculinity connects at least some of the Cavendish Club women:

They wore skirts – but the kind of skirts a tailor might design if he were set, for dare, to sew a bustle for a gent. Many seemed clad in walking-suits or riding-habits. Many wore pince-nez, or carried monocles on ribbons. There were one or two rather startling coiffures; and there were more neckties than I had ever before seen brought together at an exclusively female ensemble. (Waters 272)

The masculine women at the club are dressed up in either suits or skirts that have a certain kind of masculine air to them, and, furthermore, complete their outfit with different kinds of men's accessories like monocles and ties. Thus, it is clear that masculinity or butchness is connected to lesbianism, and through Diana's friends Nan then also becomes one of many at least partly masculine lesbians instead of having to continue thinking that she is different from everyone else. In other words, through the many women she meets through Diana, Nan slowly develops a sense of belonging in a group of lesbians, and, as a result, starts to come into terms with her identity in particular as a masculine lesbian.

While Nan has always enjoyed wearing men's clothing, it now becomes clearer that it might be because of her (what we would now define as) butch identity as dressing up as a boy makes her feel more confident about herself and, furthermore, she is excited about the fact that her masculine appearance pleases other lesbians. When Diana gives her a new costume, she is delighted because "it looked, I knew, very well on me" (Waters 260). When she recalls all the men's costumes she has ever worn, she seems proud and concludes that "I had worn them all, and worn them wisely and rather well" (Waters 268). When Diana takes Nan to the Cavendish Club for the first time, she orders a handsome dress for Nan, who thinks she is "unsettlingly attractive" in it and looks "like

some living picture, a blond lord or angel whom a jealous artist has captured transfixed behind the glass” (Waters 270). From these examples, it is clear that looking masculine indeed boosts Nan’s self-confidence and makes her feel better about herself. At the same time, she sees herself as the possible object of lesbian desire. She takes pride in her masculinity and her ability to wear men’s costumes “wisely”, as she puts it, thus slowly embracing her identity as a masculine lesbian (Waters 268). The next subchapter will, accordingly, concentrate on Nan finally coming to terms with her sexual identity and giving up performing to be herself.

3.3 Masculine Lesbian Identity

In the third part of the novel, Diana has kicked Nan out of her mansion in St John’s Wood after Nan has rebelled against Diana’s rules, opened her case of sex toys without her permission and had sex with one of her female servants. Nan then meets Florence, a devoted social worker, and moves in with her, her brother Ralph and Cyril, the baby they are taking care of. Eventually Nan and Florence become a couple as well. It is with Florence that Nan finally gains the final courage to show her sexual identity as a masculine lesbian in public. In this subchapter I will, then, discuss Nan’s abandoning of masculinity as a role and embracing of it as a part of her identity.

When Nan has moved in with Florence, she tries to return to femininity one more time as she feels that she wants to have an ordinary life again and that through femininity she might perhaps be able to get her old self back: “I had been a regular girl once; I could be regular again – being regular, indeed, might prove a kind of holiday” (Waters 373). Thus, she lets her hair, “which had already lost its military sharpness”, grow and even begins to “curl it at the ends” (Waters 381). She also gives up her old clothes for “a pair of shoes with bows on” and “a hat with a wired flower and a dress with a ribbon at the neck” (Waters 381). However, the switch from masculinity back into femininity does not go as smoothly as Nan has hoped. Instead of making Nan look and feel nice and clean, the new clothes have quite the opposite effect:

The truth was, I had looked awful ever since leaving St John's Wood; and now, in a flowery frock, I only looked extraordinarily awful. The clothes I had bought, they were the kind I'd used to wear in Whitstable and with Kitty; and I seemed to remember that I had been known then as a handsome enough girl. But it was as if wearing gentlemen's suits had magically unfitted me for girliness, for ever – as if my jaw had grown firmer, my brows heavier, my hips slimmer and my hands extra large, to match the clothes Diana had put me in. The bruise at my eye faded quickly enough, but the brawl with Dickie's book had left me with a scar at my cheek – I have it there still; and this, combined with the new firmness at my shoulders and thighs, got from carrying buckets and whitening steps, gave me something of the air of a rough. (Waters 381)

In other words, through the years, Nan has become so masculine that she cannot shake it off or make it go away anymore, even if she wanted to. There is no returning to femininity for Nan the way she used to know it; instead, masculinity has become a crucial and permanent part of who she is. She concludes that she now “looked like a youth in the back-room of some boys' club, rinsing himself down after a boxing match”, which describes her obvious masculinity quite clearly (Waters 381). Also, the difference between Nan's appearances now compared to her sophisticated look when alongside Diana is remarkable. When with Diana she resembled an upper-class youth, now her looks are those of a rough working-class boy. Furthermore, because Nan is now so obviously masculine, dressing up in women's clothes again only makes her look and feel silly and unlike herself. She dreams of walking in Leicester Square in her guardsman's uniform and her hair “clipped military-style” and when she wakes up she fingers “my drab little curls and my flowery frock in a kind of disgust” (Waters 404). Furthermore, when she goes to the market, she finds herself “lingering at the window of a gentlemen's outfitters, with my fingertips pressing smears of sweat and longing against the glass” (Waters 404). Thus, Nan does not feel comfortable in femininity anymore and instead longs to be masculine again. Her butch identity becomes clear to her when she realises that going back to femininity is not an option for her anymore because she feels disgusted by it in herself. As a result, she understands that she cannot hide from her identity anymore and decides to give up trying to be feminine to become a masculine woman in public for the first time. As mentioned in the theory part, one of Munt's (1998, 1) definitions for butch/femme is concerned with having a certain kind of identity. It seems clear that Nan indeed has the identity of

what we would now call a butch lesbian because other kind of identities make her feel uncomfortable or even disgusted.

Embracing masculinity all over again gives Nan a sense of relief and freedom. She buys herself new men's clothes such as "moleskin trousers, and a set of drawers and a shirt, and a pair of braces and some lace-up boots" and has her hair cut short again (Waters 404):

I knocked on the door of a girl who was known for doing haircuts for a penny and said: 'Cut it off, cut it all off, quick, before I change my mind!' She scissored the curls away, and – toms grow easily sentimental over their haircuts, but I remember this sensation very vividly – it was not like she was cutting hair, it was as if I had a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she was slicing me free... (Waters 404-405)

Hair has always played a crucial role in Nan's search for lesbian identity. At first, it was Kitty's shorn hair that caught her attention and made her want another woman sexually, and later, when she had her own hair cut short for the impersonating act, she felt saucy and, again, started wanting Kitty. Long hair has traditionally symbolised femininity, and by having her hair cut short one more time Nan is freeing herself from her past as a feminine girl and embracing life as a butch. Femininity feels like a burden for Nan and the new haircut lifts that burden off her shoulders. With masculinity Nan is free to be herself without having to play the role of the feminine woman. At the same time Nan is leaving her masculine roles behind as this haircut is the first masculine haircut that she is going to carry as a woman, not as a male impersonator or a female-to-male cross-dresser.

Nan's transformation from femininity back to masculinity happens gradually, from private to public. The reason for this is probably the fact that since this is the first time Nan leaves masculinity as a boy-role behind and comes out as herself, a masculine lesbian, she is afraid of how people are going to react to her sexual identity. Hence, at first Nan only wears her trousers at home, "to do the housework in – at least, for a month or so I did" (Waters 406). After that, since the neighbours have already caught glimpses of her in her trousers, she also starts wearing them when she goes to the market or has to do something outside but still near the house: "since I had become known in the district as something of a trouser-wearer, it seemed rather a fuss to take the trousers off at night and

put a frock on” (Waters 407). However, when Nan and Florence go out to an East End pub with their friends, Nan considers her outfit more carefully as she thinks trousers “must be rather too bold for an East End audience” (Waters 411). Instead, she dresses up in a skirt but nevertheless holds on to her masculinity by wearing “a gentleman’s shirt and collar, and a tie” (Waters 411). Hence, when Nan is not dressing up to perform or pass as man but instead goes out in public as herself, she needs to be more careful in how masculine her clothes can be. As mentioned earlier, after all, masculinity was not a desirable quality in a woman in the 19th century. However, even though Nan thinks that she has to wear a skirt when she goes out and thus cannot be as masculine as she would want to be, she nevertheless manages to feel comfortable in her clothes: “For all that it was skirts and stays and petticoats that I pulled on, I felt as I thought a young man must feel when dressing for his sweetheart” (Waters 411). Hence, despite the fact that some of her clothes are feminine, Nan still feels masculine and good about herself. She is thus willing to compromise her level of masculinity as long as she still can portray masculinity in public in the first place.

Another point about Nan being her masculine self in public is the fact that when previously she has been rather bold and proud of her masculine appearance, for example when passing as man in the streets of London and when accompanying Diana dressed up as a boy, now she is not as confident anymore. When she goes to the pub with Florence, people stare at her and suddenly she feels “strangely shy of them and their opinion” (Waters 415). Hence, now that she is not performing a role anymore or masquerading herself as a man but instead goes out as herself, she feels nervous of what people might think of her and is unsure whether they are going to judge her for her masculinity or not. In short, being her masculine self in front of other people makes Nan feel more vulnerable than she was when she was disguised as a man. Because she is now for the first time showing her sexual identity to people, their opinion on her matters to her more than before.

It is surprisingly easy for Nan to be both masculine and a lesbian in public because the people around her seem to be quite tolerant and open-minded. As Wilson (302) points out, when Nan and

Florence become lovers, “their sexuality is quietly accepted by their friends and acquaintances”. As a result, “Nan does not have to hide her feelings, as she did with Kitty, or live in a state of constant performance, as she did with Diana” (Wilson 302). With the help of this accepting atmosphere, Wilson (302) concludes, Nan can begin “the painful separation of her sexual identity from her music hall performances and the memories of Kitty that have pursued her”. It is also important to note that all of Florence’s friends are lesbians so therefore it might seem obvious that they are accepting of Nan and Florence’s relationship. Still, Nan is strikingly masculine compared to many other 19th-century lesbians and her masculinity could possibly cause some commotion even among lesbians, as it did when Nan visited the Cavendish Club with Diana. However, Florence’s friends do not judge her. In fact, they merely joke light-heartedly about Nan’s appearance as Florence’s friend Annie does when she meets Nan for the first time:

‘Then you, I suppose, must be the fairy king himself. Or is it, the fairy queen? I cannot tell if your hair is at odds with your costume, or the other way around. If that’ – she laughed again – ‘means anything.’ (Waters 368)

It is easier for Nan to give up playing a role and be herself when the people around her accept her as she is.

It is also important to note that Nan now lives in Bethnal Green, a then working-class area of London, which also makes it easier for her to be her masculine self in public. After all, “in some houses in Bethnal Green” “it was a luxury to have any sort of clothes at all, and you regularly saw women in their husbands’ jackets, and sometimes a man in a shawl” (Waters 407). The rules as to how feminine a woman should be in the Victorian times were not quite as strict in working classes as they were in middle and upper classes because working-class families were poor, and the women could often not choose the clothes they wore. Women could wear men’s clothes and men could wear women’s clothes – the main thing was to stay warm and healthy. As a result, Nan does not stand out where she lives despite her masculine appearances. Even though her hair is shorn and thus looks rather rough, no one seems unfriendly towards her (Waters 364). Hence, at least among

working-class women and men, a woman could be somewhat masculine without seeming threatening or strange. As I mentioned in my theory, different classes had different values in the Victorian era, and the middle-class ideal of the perfect lady was impossible to achieve for working-class women because of economic and social reasons. Hence, the working-class neighbourhood where Nan and Florence live allows Nan to be masculine because femininity is not demanded of working-class women as strictly as it is of middle-class or upper-class women because of poverty.

Yet another thing that makes it easier for Nan to be herself in public is the fact that when she goes out as her masculine self, she is noticed and accepted by other lesbians. This becomes clear when Nan and Florence go to the aforementioned East End pub and meet a group of lesbians who used to idolise Nan when she was still working the music halls with Kitty. In fact, it turns out that Nan has been quite the butch icon among other masculine lesbians, and many women have also been interested in her:

‘Fancy us still having that [a picture of Nan and Kitty as mashers] pinned up’, she said. ‘I remember the gal what put it there: she was rather keen on you – indeed, you was always something of a favourite, at the Boy [the pub]. She got it from a lady in the Burlington Arcade. Did you know there was a lady there, selling pictures such as yours, to interested gals?’ (Waters 420)

Furthermore, the lesbians at the pub are excited to meet Nan and it turns out they have also suspected her of being a lesbian: a woman concludes that she “cannot say I never wondered”, and it also turns out that during a performance, Nan has even thrown a chocolate coin to Florence’s friend Annie, who “thought I should die!” because she wanted Nan so much (Waters 421). At the end of the evening, all the lesbians at the pub are friends with Nan and they want to know if they will see her again at the pub some time. Thus, Nan is finally really bonding with other lesbians and making real lesbian friends of her own, which is quite different compared to her performing different boy-roles to entertain Diana and her friends, for example. She also begins to realise that she has hidden her sexual identity in vain in the past because other lesbians have known about or at least guessed her butchness all along and accepted it. When other people accept Nan as she is, it is easier for her

to accept herself as well. Becoming part of a lesbian community is hence important for Nan because she finally fits in and belongs somewhere.

The pub, the Boy in the Boat, introduces yet another kind of lesbian space in the novel. The pub is actually a small room that is situated near the Thames and thus quite far from the better areas of London. The entrance to the room is at the back of the building and the room itself is quite well hidden as well:

Here a set of rather steep and treacherous-looking steps took us downwards, to what must once have been a cellar; at the bottom there was the room – the Boy in the Boat, I remembered to call it – that we had come for. (Waters 414)

Hence, the pub is out of sight and only the people who know where it is can find it. It is frequented by prostitutes and toms and it is quite obviously a working-class space. It also makes sense that the clientele of the Boy consists of these two groups of women in particular. As I mentioned in my theory, there was a certain connection between toms, or masculine women, and prostitutes – both were considered socially threatening by the middle class because they, at least supposedly, “exhibit extramarital desires and have aggressive sexual tendencies” (Halberstam 1998, 51). In *Tipping the Velvet*, the working-class lesbian bar functions as a space that differs from the upper-class lesbian space of Diana’s mansion or the likewise upper-class Cavendish Ladies’ Club. At the same time, the working-class women at the Boy introduce a certain kind of lesbian subculture as they spend time in their own place that is not meant for everyone. Hence, in the novel, and probably in real life as well, different classes have different spaces and not all lesbians go to the same places. Through her many different acquaintances, Nan manages to experience several different lesbian spaces in the course of the novel but that does not mean that all 19th-century lesbians could do that. Victorian people were confined to their own class and the according rules and values. Thus, Victorian London was not only a gendered space but a class space as well.

The lesbian pub in *Tipping the Velvet* resembles the more recent phenomenon of lesbian bar culture in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s. Sullivan (27) refers to this as “the bar dyke

community”, which refers to the fact that lesbian women assembled in lesbian bars, thus forming their own subculture in the USA. The lesbians who frequented these bars were, according to Sullivan (27), often masculine butch lesbians who “did not see themselves as women who passed as men, but as butches; that is, ‘masculine’ women who made explicit the existence of lesbianism, and who overtly resisted what they saw as heterosexist norms”. The women at the Boy in *Tipping the Velvet* seem to be similar to the butch lesbians described by Sullivan although some of the women in the novel are said to pass. Nevertheless, Waters as a postmodern Victorian writer is aware of the bar dyke culture and perhaps even intends to refer to it with the description of the masculine lesbians at the Boy. Furthermore, Waters describes a similar lesbian community in her novel *The Night Watch* where the masculine lesbian Kay, her female ambulance driver friend Mickey and some other masculine women often meet in the boat where Mickey lives to have tea or beer and talk about different things. This novel, as mentioned before, takes place in the 1940s and thus probably echoes the bar dyke culture of the USA even more obviously than *Tipping the Velvet*.

Some of the lesbians Nan meets at the Boy are as masculine as her. Up until now Nan has always been the only overtly masculine woman, as was the case when she was at the Cavendish Club among Diana’s friends and now with Florence’s friends, but at the pub Nan is certainly not the only butch. In fact, some of the women are so masculine that even Nan mistakes them for men at first:

I said to Florence, ‘I thought you said it was to be all toms here? There are blokes over there.’ ‘Blokes? Are you sure?’ She turned to where I pointed, and gazed with me at the billiard players. They were rather rowdy, and half of them were clad in trousers and waistcoats, and sported prison crops. But as Florence studied them, she laughed. ‘Blokes?’ she said again. ‘Those are not blokes! Nancy, how could you think it?’

I blinked, and looked again. I began to see...They were not men, but girls; they were girls – and they were rather like myself... (Waters 416-417)

When Nan finally realises that the people at the billiard table are masculine women instead of men, she sees herself in them. In other words, she identifies with these women because for the first time she is not the only very masculine woman present. She realises that because there are other women

just like her out there, she is not somehow deviant or abnormal after all. This becomes apparent in the following extract:

I swallowed. I said, ‘Do they live as men, those girls?’

Florence shrugged, not noticing the thickness in my voice. ‘Some do, I believe. Most dress as they please, and live as others care to find them.’ She caught my gaze. ‘I had rather thought, you know, that you must’ve done the same sort of thing, yourself...’

‘Would you think me very foolish,’ I answered, ‘if I said that I had thought I was the only one...?’ (Waters 417)

Nan has considered herself a freak of nature of some kind because she has never seen anyone else like her before. With Kitty she had to hide her sexual identity and thus could not bond with other lesbians, and Diana’s upper-class lesbian friends were never as masculine as Nan, probably because their class would not allow it. When she now sees the group of very masculine women at the pub, her eyes are opened to the fact that female masculinity exists in the real world, too, and so it is not only limited to the world of theatre and performance. In short, Nan finally finds her place and feels like she fits in with these women. Therefore, the fact that Nan is now able to identify with other, in contemporary terms, butch women helps her in accepting her own butchness and being open about it.

It is also interesting that even though earlier one of the reasons why Nan disguised herself as a man was the fact that as a man she was granted freedom of movement in London, she does not lose that freedom despite the fact that she now goes about as a masculine woman. As mentioned earlier, Florence is a social worker, and through her Nan also becomes one in the end. According to Ciocia, the role of the social worker was open to both men and women and hence in this role the urban space was available to Victorian women from the 1880s onwards. As a result, the fact that Nan now embraces her sexual identity as opposed to continuing to hide herself behind the boy-role does not mean that she loses the space and freedom granted to her as a man – as opposed to this, as a social worker she continues to be an active member of her society despite her femaleness.

According to Ciocia, with Florence “coming out eventually becomes a public, as well as a private, act” for Nan. This refers to the fact that Nan’s coming out in public is symbolically linked

with her stepping out and giving a speech at the Socialist Demonstration in Victoria Park, in front of a huge audience like in theatre, but now for the first time as herself, without a disguise of any kind. Her speech is a success and when it ends, “there was a second’s silence, then a burst of thunderous applause” (Waters 459). The speech symbolically terminates Nan’s theatrical career as for the first time she steps on the stage as herself and receives applause for what she does as herself, not in a role behind a disguise. While it is true that Nan gives the speech only to help Florence’s brother Ralph who is too nervous to do it himself, and that delivering a speech in an inspiring way can also be considered acting, it is nevertheless clear that Nan is now standing in front of an audience as herself and being cheered for it. She is finally brave enough to show her identity without being afraid of what people might think of her. Therefore, she is also ready to leave different roles behind and embrace life as a masculine lesbian.

The final symbolical gesture on Nan’s part to leave her past roles behind is the fact that when she meets Kitty at the Socialist Demonstration, she rejects her, as well as her old stage name (Ciocia). For Nan, Kitty represents hiding and lying about her sexual identity because Kitty never wanted anyone to find out that she and Nan were lovers. Now Kitty comes back, still married to Walter, but wanting to start a new relationship with Nan:

‘Come back to you?’ I said. ‘With you, still Walter’s wife?’
 ‘All that means nothing,’ she said quickly. ‘There’s nothing – like that – between him and me now. If we were only a little careful...’
 ‘Careful!’ I said: the word had made me flinch. ‘Careful! Careful! That’s all I ever had from you. We were so careful, we might as well have been dead!’ I shook myself free of her. ‘I have a new girl now, who’s not ashamed to be my sweetheart.’ (Waters 466)

While Kitty still wants to be in a secret lesbian relationship, Nan is ready to leave hiding behind. She is not interested in covering her identity anymore. Furthermore, she rejects her old stage name Nan when Kitty calls her by that name: “‘Don’t call me that,’ I said pettishly. ‘No one calls me that now. It ain’t my name, and never was’” (Waters 467). By giving up her stage name, Nan also gives up playing any more roles. Instead, she wants to live her life as herself and be called by her real name Nancy Astley again. As Wilson (302-303) points out, after the brief encounter with Kitty,

“Nan has finally let Kitty – and the music hall theatricality associated with their relationship – go”. Ciocia sees Nan’s journey in the novel as that of a theatrical apprenticeship where she goes through the roles of the spectator, the actor and the director. She concludes that “it is only after this final role, which symbolically takes her to the heart of London, that Nancy can successfully terminate her ‘theatrical’ career, repudiate her stage name and reconcile herself with a newfound authentic sense of personal identity”.

Finally, then, Nan finds a way to balance her previous roles: in the end, she is not the traditionally feminine woman that she was in Whitstable nor does she play the part of a man like she did in the music halls and with Diana. Instead, she is a mixture of both genders and supposedly continues her life as a masculine woman from now on. In my theory I pointed out that Butler has questioned the fixedness of gender and criticised the fact that in a heteronormative world gender is supposed to originate from the corresponding sex. It seems that at least Nan is indeed an example of someone whose gender identity is not limited to her sex but instead it is possible for her to be both female and masculine at the same time; hence, portray female masculinity.

4. Lesbian Relationships

This chapter focuses on the representation of lesbian relationships in *Tipping the Velvet*. I have grouped the relationships in the novel under the following models: romantic friendship, sexual relationship and lesbian family. My aim is to analyse the three relationships Nan is in during the novel and point out the reasons why they can be considered representative of the groups I have placed them in. In the subchapter on romantic friendship I will discuss Nan and Kitty's relationship, the subchapter on sexual relationship will focus on Nan and Diana, and, finally, the subchapter on lesbian family will deal with Nan and Florence.

4.1 In the Closet: Romantic Friendship

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan and Kitty's relationship appears as friendship to the people outside the relationship because they hide their romantic and sexual feelings for each other in public. As I mentioned earlier in both the introduction and the theory chapter, lesbian scholarship has indeed often defined 19th-century same-sex desire in terms of romantic friendship (Halberstam 1998, 50). This refers to the fact that even though two women might have had loving feelings towards each other in the 19th century, their relationships were nevertheless often seen mainly as asexual. In other words, the romantic friendship model has ignored the possible sexual aspect of these relationships. Similarly, Thane (187) pointed out that, in the 19th century, many unmarried women had long and passionate friendships that could be interpreted as lesbian relationships. These friendships might have seemed innocent but could in reality have been much more because they were, as we remember, "unsupervised by a legal system which made no comment upon lesbianism" (*ibid.*). As Hall (107-108) reminds us, even though homosexual activity between men was punished by death for centuries in Britain, "homosexual activity between women was never explicitly criminalized". Halberstam (1998, 65) asserts that this might be because it was far more comforting

to interpret close relationships between two women as asexual friendship as opposed to acknowledging “the possibility of female sexual aggression in the nineteenth century”.

According to Hall (107), historian Lillian Faderman has “traced the ‘romantic’ friendships of women across many centuries in Britain and America” in her book *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1985). As Jagose (13-14) puts it, in her book, “spanning the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Faderman reads a range of historical and literary texts in order to demonstrate the ubiquity in western culture of sexual or intensely affectionate relations between women”. However, Faderman acknowledges that “it is impossible to know when and in what form sexual contact occurred between women who cohabited or publicly expressed their ardent feelings for each other” (Hall 107). After all, “patriarchal belief systems, serving the interests of men and male-dominated institutions such as the church, expressly denied women the capacity or right to feel sexual desires except as channelled into the structure of marriage and reproduction” (*ibid.*). Regardless of this, it would be foolish to assume there was no sexual activity between women “simply because it was not written about or was rarely mentioned in the annals of legal activity” (*ibid.*). In fact, it is quite possible that, in many cases, what outsiders viewed as romantic friendship between two women was actually lesbianism disguised as close friendship. This is how Nan and Kitty’s relationship is portrayed in *Tipping the Velvet*.

Faderman’s views have been criticised by many lesbian and queer theorists. Halberstam (1998, 55) points out that, for example, Vicinus critiques the romantic-friendship historians like Faderman and Blanche Wiesen Cook “for ignoring gender variations among women and for assuming the asexual nature of many relations between women”. Furthermore, Faderman and yet another romantic-friendship historian, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, have been criticised “for separating lesbianism from overt sexual activity and for producing rather stereotypical notions of the moral and pure nature of nineteenth-century true womanhood” (Halberstam 1997, 330). It is important to

acknowledge the fact that 19th-century romantic friendship probably often did involve sexual activity between two women – we just do not have much evidence of it.

Because 19th-century romantic friendship often appeared as merely friendship and not (in contemporary terms) homosexuality to the people outside the relationship, it in a way resembles the more current concept of the closet. As argued earlier, real-life romantic friendship was probably something more than just friendship and probably did involve sex between the women in the relationship as well; the possible sexual aspect of the relationship was simply kept a secret and hidden from view for fear of punishment or judgment. Similarly, the contemporary concept of the closet refers to the fact that one keeps their sexual identity a secret instead of being open about it. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), argues that “the closet, representing a known secret, is a central trope structuring contemporary Western thinking” (Taylor 15). The closet, then, maintains heterosexual normativity through keeping “the known secret of homosexuality safely hidden away” (*ibid.*). Taylor (15) asserts that, “as sites of passing for straight”, closets “allow us to be simultaneously (queer) inside and (straight) outside, a highly transgressive double position. The closet then becomes a stage for the (tricky) performance of sexuality.” When heterosexuality can thus be performed, “all heterosexuality becomes open to question” (Taylor 15). Similarly, then, romantic friendship in a way passes as heterosexual friendship between two women instead of being openly homosexual. As Gowing (63) points out, “invisibility is also always part of the lesbian and gay experience, and the secrecy and individualism of sexual experiences is as crucial to the lesbian and gay past as publicity, visibility and community”. Hence, it is important to realise that even if sexual experiences between two women might have been hidden from view in the 19th century, they probably still existed in secret.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan and Kitty’s relationship begins as friendship where both of the girls secretly have romantic feelings for each other. Later on when they confess their feelings to one another and become a couple, they keep their relationship a secret and thus, in contemporary terms,

live their love life in the closet, pretending they are heterosexual in public. The purpose of this subchapter is to examine Nan and Kitty's relationship and see in what ways it can be said to be an example of closeted romantic friendship. I will treat 19th-century romantic friendship and the more contemporary concept of the closet as slightly different versions of the same phenomenon, namely that of hiding one's sexual identity and lesbian relationship to pass as straight for one reason or another. Thus, Waters sheds some light on the history of women's so called romantic friendships and connects them with the contemporary phenomenon of closeted relationships.

As this chapter deals with Nan's many lesbian relationships in *Tipping the Velvet* and as they are always strongly influenced by the person Nan is in the relationship with, it is of use to introduce the character of Kitty here more closely. Kitty is a working-class girl, who has been in lesbian relationships even before falling in love with Nan. However, her career as a music-hall artist is important to her and so, in order to safeguard her job and her reputation, she has always kept her feelings towards other women a secret. Kitty is afraid that if people, and especially her audience, find out about her lesbianism, her career will be ruined forever, and that is why it is crucial for her to stay in the closet. This is something that remains in today's world as well – many public figures, for example, choose to keep their sexual orientation secret to keep it from possibly ruining their career.

As mentioned earlier, Nan and Kitty's relationship begins as friendship when Nan goes to the Canterbury Palace to see Kitty's performance every night and Kitty eventually asks Nan to meet her backstage because, according to her, she has never had a fan before. The two become friends and later on Nan also becomes Kitty's dresser. However, in addition to the friendship, from the beginning, Nan has both romantic and sexual feelings for Kitty in secret. When Nan goes to see Kitty's performance before they know each other, Nan is jealous of a girl that Kitty throws her rose at: "A lovely girl I had never seen before but felt ready at that moment to despise!" (Waters 17).

Moreover, more than anything, Nan wants Kitty to look at her in the audience and to recognise her existence:

I looked back to Kitty Butler. She had her topper raised and was making her final, sweeping salute. Notice me, I thought. Notice me! I spelled the words in my head in scarlet letters, as the husband of the mentalist had advised, and sent them burning into her forehead like a brand. *Notice me!* (Waters 17, italics in the original)

In other words, Nan is desperate for Kitty's attention. Furthermore, her love for Kitty becomes quite obvious when she confides in her sister Alice:

'When I see her', I said, 'it's like – I don't know what it's like. It's like I never saw anything at all before. It's like I am filling up, like a wine-glass when it's filled with wine. I watch the acts before her and they are like nothing – they're like dust. Then she walks on the stage and – she is so pretty; and her suit is so nice; and her voice is so sweet...She makes me want to smile and weep, at once. She makes me sore, here.' I placed a hand upon my chest, upon the breast-bone. 'I never saw a girl like her before, I never knew that there were girls like her...' (Waters 20)

However, Alice's reaction is not what Nan has hoped for but, rather, she has "a look of mingled shock, and nervousness, and embarrassment or shame" on her face (Waters 20). It is here that Nan for the first times feels as though she should have kept her feelings a secret because it is obvious from Alice's reaction that her love for another girl is not something people will find easy to accept. Despite this, Nan continues to see Kitty backstage, and the more often she visits her, the closer their friendship becomes and, eventually, they start calling each other by their first names.

Nan's secret sexual feelings for Kitty become more obvious when she becomes Kitty's dresser. When Kitty is on stage, Nan arranges her outfits and blushes "to handle them, for I couldn't help but think of all the soft and secret places they would soon enclose, or brush against, or warm and make moist, once she had donned them" (Waters 36). Similarly, backstage, Nan does little things for Kitty, like empties her ashtrays, wipes her table and dusts her mirror. She considers these things "acts of love, these humble little ministrations, and of pleasure, even, perhaps, of a kind of *self-pleasure*, for it made me feel strange and hot and almost shameful to perform them" (Waters 38, italics in the original). Also, when at home in her bed at night, Nan dreams of Kitty in a very sexual way:

How Kitty would have blushed, to know the part she played in my fierce dreamings – to know how shamelessly I took my memories of her, and turned them to my own improper advantage! Each night at the Palace she kissed me farewell; in my dreams her lips stayed at my cheek – were hot, were tender – moved to my brow, my ear, my throat, my mouth...I was used to standing close to her, to fasten her collar-studs or brush her lapels; now, in my reveries, I did what I longed to do then – I leaned to place my lips upon the edges of her hair; I slid my hands beneath her coat, to where her breasts pressed warm against her stiff gent's shirt and rose to meet my strokings...(Waters 41)

Thus, it is obvious that Nan is indeed sexually interested in Kitty. This view of 19th-century lesbianism seems to be Waters's attempt to oppose the asexual romantic friendship model. Even though at this point Nan and Kitty have not yet expressed their feelings to each other and remain friends, it is nevertheless clear that Nan dreams of doing sexually exciting things with Kitty.

Similarly, Kitty clearly has feelings for Nan in secret as well. When Nan visits her backstage for the first time, Kitty kisses her hand and tells her that she smells "like a mermaid" and insists she come visit her again in the future (Waters 33). After their first meeting, whenever Nan goes to see Kitty's performance, when Kitty leaves the stage "there was that sweep of her hat for the hall, and a nod, or a wink, or the ghost of a smile, just for me [Nan]" (35). Hence, there are secret messages, almost like flirting, between Kitty and Nan in front of the audience, who do not notice anything. Also, Kitty wants to visit Nan's family in Whitstable because she thinks it will be "nice to see where you live and work, and to catch your train; and to meet the people that love you, and have you with them all day" (Waters 42). In other words, it seems that Kitty is eager to see what Nan's life in Whitstable is like so that she can better imagine where Nan is and what she is doing when they are not together. Finally, Kitty wants Nan to come to London with her when she is offered a job there because "I – like you. Because you are good for me, and bring me luck. And because London will be strange; and Mr Bliss [Walter, Kitty's new manager] may not be all that he seems; and I shall have no one..." (Waters 55). Hence, Kitty does not want to give Nan up but instead feels safe with her and thus wants to both have her career and Nan in her life.

Even after moving to London, Nan and Kitty continue to keep their feelings for each other a secret from each other and, instead of being lovers, appear to be just friends on the surface level.

Where they live in London, they have to share a tiny room and a tiny bed, which was common for working-class people, and which also often enabled lesbian relationships in the 19th century. Nan and Kitty are indeed intimate with each other, even though they do not confess their feelings to one another. For example, when they sleep side by side in the same bed for the first time, Kitty comes close to Nan, hugs her and confesses that she was always jealous of Nan and her sister Alice for sleeping in the same bed in Whitstable and that she is happy that “we’re like sisters now, aren’t we Nan?” (Waters 78). Even though this is clearly Kitty’s attempt to get closer to admitting her feelings to Nan, Nan thinks that she must now learn to “swallow my queer and inconvenient lusts, and call her ‘sister’. For to be Kitty’s sister was better than to be Kitty’s nothing, Kitty’s no one...I must learn to love Kitty as Kitty loved me; or never be able to love her at all. And that, I know, would be terrible” (Waters 78). In other words, because being sisters means doing nothing sexual, Nan thinks that she has to abandon her lesbian desires towards Kitty and accept the fact that their relationship will be asexual and remain on the level of friendship. Hence, Nan does not interpret Kitty’s caresses to be acts of tommyish lust but instead thinks that Kitty only loves her in a sisterly way. Kitty does caress Nan a lot, which makes Nan feel confused at first: “Her touch made me stiffen again: I was still not used to the easy caresses, the hand-holdings and cheek-stroking, of our friendship, and every one of them made me flinch slightly, and colour faintly, with desire and confusion” (Waters 71). As time goes by, Nan, however, grows used to sleeping with Kitty by her side and learns to “lean into her embraces, to accept her kisses, chastely, nonchalantly – and even, sometimes, to return them” (Waters 88-89). Their relationship seems quite innocent and perhaps like a typical example of romantic friendship. The girls clearly love each other but, innocent-seeming kisses and hugs aside, their relationship remains asexual. This description is quite similar to the relationship between the characters of Sue and Maud in Waters’s novel *Fingersmith*. Sue and Maud also share a room and, before admitting their feelings to one another, they also experience closeness with each other through holding hands, kissing and hugging in a friendly or sisterly way.

Eventually Nan and Kitty admit their feelings to one another as Kitty grows jealous while Nan dances with a boy at a ball. On their way home from the ball, Nan and Kitty stop to watch the Thames freeze over and end up kissing and, later on that same night, making love. Hence, once Nan and Kitty begin a conscious lesbian relationship, it also includes sex and kissing in a sexually exciting way. A similar thing occurs in *Fingersmith* as well – once Sue and Maud become a couple, they start having sex on a regular basis. This differs quite drastically from the view of 19th-century relationships between women as asexual. As for example Halberstam (1998, 55) pointed out, romantic friendship historians have been criticised for ignoring the sexual aspect of 19th-century lesbian relationships. Waters, on the other hand, in both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*, appears to be rewriting lesbian history so that, instead of ignoring the sexual aspect of these relationships, her characters have rich sexual lives and, in addition, being sexual is a natural part of their life.

However, even though Nan and Kitty are a couple now, the theme of secrecy continues. When earlier they kept their feelings hidden from each other, now they have to keep their relationship hidden from everyone else. This is because Kitty demands they keep their relationship and feelings in the closet for fear of her losing her job and ruining her reputation. Because this is Nan's first lesbian relationship, she agrees to do anything Kitty wants her to do for fear of otherwise losing Kitty. Hence, as Wilson (296) also points out, "Nan dons a painful mask of heterosexuality" in order to make Kitty happy. Even though Nan does not feel the need to hide her love for Kitty and even though it is difficult for her, she nevertheless does what Kitty requests of her:

When Kitty and I had first become sweethearts, I had made her a promise. 'I will be careful,' I had said – and I had said it very lightly, because I thought it would be easy. I had kept my promise: I never kissed her, touched her, said a loving thing, when there was anyone to glimpse or overhear us. But it was not easy, nor did it become easier as the months passed by; it became only a dreary kind of habit. How *could* it be easy to stand cool and distant from her in the day, when we had spent all night with our naked limbs pressed hot and close together? How could it be easy to veil my glances when others watched, bite my tongue because others listened, when I passed all our private hours gazing at her till my eyes ached of it, calling her every kind of sweet name until my throat was dry? Sitting beside her at supper at Mrs Dendy's, standing near her in the green-room of a theatre, walking with her through the city

streets, I felt as though I was bound and fettered with iron bands, chained and muzzled and blinkered. Kitty had given me leave to love her; the world, she said, would never let me be anything to her except her friend. (Waters 127, italics in the original)

Also, then, it becomes obvious that there is a link between what has been perceived as romantic friendship and being in the closet. As can be seen here, Nan and Kitty keep their relationship safely hidden from view and continue to act as if nothing has changed between them and as if they are still merely very close and affectionate friends. Hence, to outsiders, their relationship appears perhaps as romantic friendship when in reality they are closeting their lesbian relationship that does have a sexual side to it. As Taylor (15) pointed out of the closet, its purpose is to “maintain the illusion of normative heterosexuality” and that is exactly what Nan and Kitty are doing.

Thus, when earlier Nan and Kitty’s relationship perhaps was romantic friendship where the girls had sexual feelings towards each other but did not act upon them, now their relationship becomes a closet relationship where their relationship has a sexual aspect that has to be kept hidden from everyone outside the relationship. This secret is safe as long as Nan and Kitty continue to pretend they are only close friends, and the pretending takes a great deal of effort, there being several instances of Nan and Kitty keeping their relationship in the closet and maintaining the illusion of heterosexuality when among other people. First of all, all the intimacy between Nan and Kitty has to come to a stop whenever it seems like someone might be coming. This can be seen, for example, in the following extract where Nan and Kitty are about to kiss in the changing room:

Then all at once there came a blast of noise from the passageway beyond, and the sound of footsteps. Kitty started in my arms as if a pistol had been fired, and took a half-dozen steps, very rapidly, away. (Waters 99)

A similar thing happens when Nan and Kitty get out of their carriage to watch the Thames freeze over. They kiss in the shadow of the carriage “where we were hidden from sight” and then “the carriage gave a creak as the driver shifted in his seat, and Kitty stepped quickly away” (Waters 103). Furthermore, Nan describes her and Kitty making love as “a thing done in passion, but always, too, in shadow and in silence, and with an ear half-cocked for the sound of footsteps on the

stairs” (Waters 127). These examples show that it is essential, especially to Kitty, that no one finds out about their intimate moments and the sexual aspect of their relationship. Therefore, whenever there even seems to be the risk of being caught kissing or making love, Nan and Kitty have to pull away from each other in order not to be exposed.

Another way of keeping the relationship in the closet is staying away from other lesbian couples in order not to be associated with lesbianism through acquaintances. In the theatre, there is another pair of women – a comic singer and her dresser – who Nan thinks “were rather like ourselves” (Waters 129). This lesbian couple, although mostly mentioned in passing, seems to be more open about their relationship to each other and they invite Nan and Kitty to a party with them. While Nan would like to go, Kitty is quick to refuse. Later on, they discuss Kitty’s reaction:

‘Nan!’ she [Kitty] said. ‘They’re not like us! They’re not like us, at all. They’re *toms*.’
 ‘Toms?’ I remember this moment very clearly for I had never heard the word before. Later I would think it marvellous that there had ever been a time I hadn’t known it.
 Now, when Kitty said it, she flinched. ‘Toms. They make a – a *career* – out of kissing girls. We’re not like that!’
 ‘Aren’t we?’ I said. (Waters 131, italics in the original)

In other words, Kitty does not want to be associated with lesbianism, or tommishness, and she even completely denies her sexual identity in order to protect her heterosexual façade. She thinks she and Nan are “not like anything” but rather “just – ourselves”, and she claims there is a difference between her and Nan and the women she refers to as toms. Nan challenges her by asking “is there a difference?” but the question does not receive a clear answer (Waters 131). It is clear that Kitty is afraid of admitting her own sexual identity to herself, which then leads to wanting to keep the relationship secret.

Moreover, when Nan and Kitty move to another apartment in London, they have separate bedrooms as a precaution even though no one else lives with them and they always sleep in the same bedroom. This is “for the sake of the girl who came to clean for us, three days a week” (Waters 146). Thus, Nan and Kitty continue to cover their relationship even in their own home. As

Nan explains, “we found we couldn’t break ourselves of our old habits: we still whispered our love, and kissed beneath the counterpane, noiselessly, like mice” (Waters 146).

Finally, Kitty agrees to marry their manager Walter. Her intention is to thus secure her and Nan’s relationship because if she is married to a man, no one can ever guess she is actually in love with Nan: “Can you not see, how this is for the best? With Walter as my husband, who would think, who would say –” (Waters 172). Jeremiah (139) argues that “Kitty marries Walter in part so that she may pass as straight, respectable, wanting Nan only as a covert source of pleasure”. At this point, Nan finally breaks away from hiding in the closet and being in a seemingly romantic friendship and leaves Kitty.

Of course, there are reasons why Kitty, and sometimes even Nan, would think that it is better or safer to keep a lesbian relationship in the closet and maintain an illusion of heterosexuality. Kitty feels like the world would never let Nan “be anything to her except her friend” but Nan does not want to believe this so she writes a letter to her sister Alice and confesses that she is in love with Kitty (Waters 127). The reply she receives is not accepting:

But you must know too that I can never be happy while your friendship with that woman is so wrong and queer. I can never like what you have told me. You think you are happy, but you are only misled – and that woman, your friend “so-called”, is to blame for it --- Let me just say at the last what you must I hope know. Father, Mother and Davy know nothing of this, and won’t from my lips, since I would rather die of shame than tell them. *You must never speak of it to them*, unless you want to finish the job you started when you first left us, and break their hearts completely and for ever. (Waters 134, italics in the original)

Also, as mentioned earlier, once when Kitty and Nan are late for stage, a man in the audience starts accusing them of being toms. Kitty’s reaction to this is one of horror as she quickly draws away from Nan and exits the stage, while people in the hall scream “Shame!” after them. It is obvious that people do not approve of lesbianism and thus staying in the closet perhaps makes life seem easier when Nan and Kitty do not have to deal with people’s reactions. After Alice’s letter, Nan does not stay in contact with her family as frequently as before, and she and Alice lose touch completely, while after the episode at the theatre, Kitty refuses to perform in the same show with

acts like “a man called ‘Paul or Pauline?’, whose turn was to dance in and out of an ebony cabinet, dressed now as a woman, now as a man, and singing soprano and baritone by turns” (Waters 143). Kitty considers the man a freak that “would make us seem freakish by association” (Waters 143). Furthermore, Wilson (298) points out that “Kitty responds to the incident at Deacon’s Music Hall by increasing the security around their relationship”. It is indeed after this incident that Kitty begins a relationship with Walter, thus “compromising her own lesbian identity for the personal and professional protection offered by a man” (Wilson 298).

Moreover, Wilson (297) points out that Nan and Kitty’s public performance and private relationship mirror each other, which becomes obvious when the two are linked to each other through descriptions of Nan dressing and undressing Kitty on different occasions. Wilson (297) argues that costume is “significant to Nan’s relationship with Kitty because it is in the role of Kitty’s dresser that Nan accompanies her to London”. At first, Nan helps Kitty during her changes: “I was her dresser in real earnest, helping her tear at buttons and links while the orchestra played between the songs, and the audience waited” (Waters 84). Wilson (297), then, points out that “Waters recalls these theatrical moments during the scene in which Kitty and Nan first make love”: “For a moment – my fingers tugging at hooks and ribbons, her own tearing at the pins which kept her plait of hair in place – we might have been at the side of a stage, making a lightning change between numbers” (Waters 104). Thus, the performance and the sexual aspect of Nan and Kitty’s relationship are connected.

Similarly, the novel makes a connection between what Nan and Kitty do on stage and in bed. Wilson (295) argues that Nan and Kitty actually “act out their own sexual feelings” on stage. This is interesting considering the fact that in private, Nan and Kitty have to hide their feelings for each other but on stage they are able to portray them in front of an audience. According to Nan, “the two things – the act, our love – were not so very different. They had been born together – or, as I liked to think, the one had been born of the other, and was merely its public shape” (Waters 127).

Similarly, she feels that “making love to Kitty, and posing at her side in a shaft of limelight, before a thousand pairs of eyes, to a script I knew by heart, in an attitude I had laboured for hours to perfect – these things were not so very different” (Waters 127-8). Wilson (295-6) goes on to assert that while Nan and Kitty are performing, they “share a private language, which Nan likens to the nonverbal communication of the bedroom”:

A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language, in which we held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing. This was a language not of the tongue but of the body, its vocabulary the pressure of a finger or a palm, the nudging of a hip, the holding or breaking of a gaze, that said, *You are too slow – you go too fast – not there, but here – that’s good – that’s better!* It was as if we walked before the crimson curtain, lay down upon the boards, and kissed and fondled – and were clapped, and cheered, and paid for it! (Waters 128, italics in the original)

Wilson (296) points out that the BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* draws more emphasis on the “connection between the act and ‘the act’ by interweaving scenes of Nan and Kitty’s sexual liaison with clips from their various theatrical performances”.

As mentioned earlier, the reason why Nan and Kitty live in a closeted lesbian relationship masqueraded as romantic friendship is the fact that Kitty is afraid of losing her job were people to find out about her lesbian tendencies. After all, the norms of the time were not accepting of what we would now define as homosexual relationships. As Wilson (299) puts it, Kitty is “caught between her love for Nan and her professional and economic self-interest”. As it is, Kitty’s fear exceeds her love for Nan and results in the need to hide her sexual identity and even deny it. According to Munt (1998, 4), the lesbian inside/outside structure is characterised by “the binary opposition of shame/pride”. By this she (*ibid.*) refers to the fact that being inside has “carried the connotations of the closet, as a prison of shame” whereas being open about one’s sexual identity and coming out has been associated with pride in postmodern times. While Nan is not as concerned as Kitty about people finding out about her being a tom and thus takes some pride in who she is, Kitty struggles in accepting herself and is ashamed of her lesbian feelings throughout the novel. Thus, in Kitty’s case, her shame prevents her from coming out of the closet and being openly lesbian. Her shame stems

from the fact that she is afraid people would not accept her tomboyishness and, as a result of that, she is also afraid of losing her job and with that her income were her audiences to find out about her relationships to other women.

Nan and Kitty's relationship is quite feminine and it can perhaps even be said to conform to the Victorian ideals of femininity in some ways. The relationship is mostly tender and sweet and also quite innocent and romantic. Nan and Kitty share romantic moments, exchange romantic gifts such as a dress and a pearl at Christmas, and use innocent words, or no words at all, to refer to making love. When Nan comes home to find Kitty and Walter together, she becomes furious and uses the word "fuck" to refer to what she has been doing with Kitty, to which the reaction is the following: "He [Walter] flinched – and so did I, for the word sounded terrible: I had never said it before, and had not known I was about to use it now" (Waters 173). This is quite drastically different from Nan and Diana's relationship. While Nan and Kitty's relationship is mainly characterised by love and emotions, Nan and Diana's relationship is based on sex as opposed to love or a deep connection between the two. The following subchapter will discuss Nan and Diana as an example of a sexual relationship between two women.

4.2 Sexual Relationship

As I pointed out in my theory, the ideal woman in the Victorian age for the middle class was the perfect lady, who represented respectable femininity and, as a result, was to be brought up "innocent and sexually ignorant" (Vicinus ix). The double standard of the time saw "sexual activity in men as a sign of 'masculinity'" and, at the same time, condemned it in women "as a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour" (Nead 6). In other words, there was to be a clear difference between active male and passive female sexuality. As Nead (6) asserts, in the nineteenth century, "female sexuality was organized around the dichotomy virgin/whore" and "the differences between the 'respectable' and the 'fallen' were defined and redefined in an attempt to create clear moral

boundaries and to prevent any possibility of confusion". Thus, a respectable woman would correspond with the existing ideals of femininity while a woman who did not conform to these ideals would be considered a threat to Victorian values.

The masculine woman and the prostitute are typical deviations from the norm of the respectable, chaste and pure Victorian lady. In Halberstam's (1998, 51) view, the nineteenth-century connection between the masculine woman and the prostitute might have something to do with marriageability. As opposed to succumbing to a husband, "the prostitute and the masculine and possibly predatory woman both exhibit extramarital desires and have aggressive sexual tendencies" (Halberstam, 1998, 51). Hence, the masculine woman was likened to the prostitute because of her supposedly aggressive sexual behaviour. This kind active sexual behaviour in a woman posed a threat to the dominant values of the Victorian society. Keeping women passive and under the control of men was a way of maintaining the ideology of home and marriage. As noted in the theory section, the family, for the middle classes in particular, represented order, and female sexual purity and moral ensured that the home remained "a source of social stability" (Nead 34).

Furthermore, Creed (88) points out that a popular stereotype concerning the nature of lesbianism has been, "in different historical periods" and, according to her, even today, that "the lesbian is really a man trapped in a woman's body". This view originates from the Renaissance when the female body was seen "as a thwarted male body and the clitoris and the labia as penis and foreskin" (Creed 91). Creed (91), then, argues that, when taking this into account, "it is no wonder that desire was also thought of as masculine. Along this continuum of desire, where male desire is hot and female cold, where the sexes are in danger of changing from one to the other, lesbian desire, the active desire of one woman for another, was seen as aggressive and virile".

Quite contrary to the Victorian ideals concerning passive female sexuality, and in accordance with the perhaps stereotypical views of female masculinity and lesbianism as sexually active, the relationship between Nan and Diana in *Tipping the Velvet* sees aggressive sexual behaviour

between two women. The purpose of this subchapter, then, is to take a closer look at this relationship and its sexual aspects. Again, at first, it is important to introduce the character of Diana more closely because this relationship is strongly influenced, and also made possible in the first place, by her habits and class. As mentioned before, Diana is an upper-class widow who “can find ways of expressing her homosexuality without fear of incurring into public censure” because of “the greater power and freedom attached to her privileged social status” (Ciocia). Indeed, Diana has her own mansion, servants and money. Thus, she is not dependent on a man but rather is free to make her own decisions and control those around her. As Nan also works as a kind of servant, albeit perhaps an unconventional one, living as a boy and fulfilling Diana’s sexual needs, Diana is entitled to order her to do what she wants as well. As a result, when with Kitty Nan had to perform the role of Kitty’s friend, with Diana she “is denied all aspects of her identity beyond her sexuality; she exists purely for Diana’s pleasure” (Wilson 300). The relationship is thus that of a master, or a mistress, and a servant.

Right from the start, Diana’s behaviour towards Nan is quite masculine and, in a way, perhaps typical of men in that she takes control and commands Nan to do as she says, as a husband could perhaps have commanded his wife in the nineteenth century, and even later. This kind of behaviour, then, creates sexual tension between Diana and Nan and is the basis for their relationship. Hence, it could be argued that Nan and Diana derive their sexual pleasure from Nan succumbing to Diana, which in a way resembles the phenomenon of sadomasochism. When Nan and Diana meet for the first time, Diana tries to persuade Nan to ride in her carriage with her, and when Nan hesitates, Diana’s reaction is as follows: “‘You little fool,’ she said. ‘Get in.’” (Waters 234). Nan does what Diana says because even though Diana is still a stranger to her, “her voice and manner were, as I have said, compelling ones” (Waters 234). Hence, even when Nan does not even know Diana yet and could perhaps easily avoid obeying her, she nevertheless is intrigued by Diana’s determinedness and indeed climbs into the carriage. Similarly, Diana stays in control when she and

Nan are about to have sex for the first time: Diana “nodded to my trousers – now gaping whitely, of course, at the buttons. ‘Take them off.’” (Waters 240). Moreover, after Nan has stripped herself of her trousers, Diana orders her to go and get something from a trunk in her bedroom. Nan hesitates again, which is when Diana “clapped her hands: ‘Presto!’ she said again, and this time, she did not smile, and her voice was rather thick” (Waters 240). Furthermore, after sex, Diana asks Nan if she is happy to have met Diana: “she [Diana] raised a hand to my throat, and stoked me there until I reddened and swallowed; and I could not help but answer: ‘Yes.’” (Waters 248). As is clear from all these examples, Diana orders and controls Nan to get what she wants sexually. On the other hand, Nan agrees to do what Diana tells her to also because of sex: Nan wants sex with other women in a world where it is, in her experience, unacceptable to be a lesbian and where one has to hide her lesbian tendencies for fear of judgment, as she did with Kitty. However, Diana can give her what she wants and needs as long as she obeys her. Diana draws this conclusion as well:

‘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 still stay and be my tart, as I desire.’ She gave my hair a cruel twist. ‘Admit that it is as I say!’ (Waters 249, italics in the original)

Hence, Diana, in her behaviour, deviates from the Victorian ideal of a passive and submissive woman and, instead, takes on an active role identical to that of a man who is in control of his wife and household. It is Diana who decides everything and Nan and everyone else who obey.

Furthermore, sex between Diana and Nan is quite aggressive, and no romantic feelings are allowed. When Victorian women were supposed to be sexually ignorant, Waters’s Diana, in addition to using sex to control people, seems to be well informed on all things sexual and, moreover, is almost completely defined by sex. Already in the carriage when Nan and Diana have just met, Diana’s hand “moved to my [Nan’s] knee, then crept to the top of my thigh, where she let it rest” (Waters 235-236). This is quite daring, and Nan even feels the urge to brush Diana’s fingers away at first. Once Nan and Diana start having sex, the descriptions of it are always without

romantic feeling and consist exclusively of sexual content. For example, Nan describes her feelings when kissing Diana in the following way: “I felt limber and hot. If I had had a cock, it would have been twitching” (Waters 259). Similarly, when with Kitty, the lovemaking was quite innocent and not referred to by any particular words, with Diana the unsentimental and rather harsh words used are “fucking”, “cunt” and “quim”:

‘You’re the boldest bitch in the city!’

‘I am!’

‘You’re the boldest bitch, with the cleverest quim. If fucking were a country – well, fuck me, you’d be its queen...!’

These were the words, which, pricked on by my mistress, I used now – lewd words which shocked and stirred me even as I said them. I had never thought to use them with Kitty. I had not *fucked* her, we had not *frigged*; we had only ever kissed and trembled. It was not a *quim* or a *cunt* she had between her legs – indeed, in all our nights together, I don’t believe we ever gave a name to it all... (Waters 267, italics in the original)

As can be seen in the extract above, no romantic words are exchanged – rather, words referred to as lewd by Nan are used to evoke even more desire and lust. Romantic feelings and love seem to indeed be something that Diana is opposed to. There is a moment when the “love-making was more leisurely than it had been before – almost, indeed, tender”, and Diana solves this problem immediately (Waters 261):

‘You may go, Nancy,’ she [Diana] said, in exactly the tone I had heard her use on her maid and Mrs Hooper. ‘I wish to sleep alone tonight.’ It was the first time she had spoken to me as a servant, and her words drove the lingering warmth of slumber quite from my limbs. Yet I took my leave, uncomplaining, and made my way to the pale room along the hall, where my own cold bed awaited. I liked her kisses, I liked her gifts still more; and if, to keep them, I must obey her – well, so be it. I was used to servicing gents in Soho at a pound a suck; obedience – to such a lady, and in such a setting – seemed at that moment a very trifling labour. (Waters 261)

In other words, when the sex becomes tender and almost loving, Diana takes control of the situation again and sends Nan to sleep in a different room in order to avoid any more closeness with her. It has to be clear who is in charge all the while, and the relationship has to stay as merely sexual. Perhaps for Diana, being emotional is a sign of weakness because feelings were associated with femininity while power and control were connected to masculinity, and as Diana wants to stay in

control, she wants to reject anything associated with femininity. Nevertheless, it is obvious that love is far from this relationship and romantic feelings are not allowed in Diana's household.

Moreover, opposing Diana causes the sex to become even more daring. When Nan and Diana are angry with each other, for example, their sex is described as more exciting than usual, and even monstrous or animalistic: "I [Nan] was occasionally sulky, but, as on the night of our trip to the opera, she [Diana] found ways of turning my sulkiness to her own lewd advantage – in the end, I hardly knew if I were really cross or only feigning crossness for the sake of her latches. Once or twice I hoped she would *make* me cross – fucking her in a rage, I found, could at the right moment be more thrilling than fucking her in kindness" (Waters 301, italics in the original). Similarly, when one time Nan refuses sex with Diana because she is feeling bad, Diana does not accept Nan's refusal. Instead, she forces Nan to have sex with her, ripping her shirt and jacket, and acting in a very threatening way towards Nan. Nan thinks Diana will hit her until she looks at Diana and sees that "her features were livid, not in fury, but in lust" and grows excited herself as well (Waters 297). While the depictions of Nan and Diana's sex do not correspond with the Victorian idea of women as passive and non-sexual, they, however, do resemble the rather stereotypical views of the lesbian body as sexually insatiable and monstrous. As Creed (86), furthermore, points out, the lesbian body as insatiable and "a monstrous quicksand of desire" is also a common view adopted in pornography, even to date. Thus, through pornography, the lesbian has been related to male fantasies. Nan and Diana's sexual relationship, then, while opposing the idea that Victorian women were sexually ignorant and passive, seems to in part enforce the views of lesbians as sexually aggressive and insatiable.

In addition, it is important to note that Diana also has a dildo, which Creed (94), again, describes as "a popular male fantasy about lesbian practices". The dildo is referred to by words such as "Monsieur Dildo", "Monsieur", "the device" and "the instrument" and it is kept hidden in Diana's trunk, which also contains other erotic material such as "an album of photographs of big-

buttocked girls with hairless parts, bearing feathers; also a collection of erotic pamphlets and novels, all hymning the delights of what I would call tommistry but what they, like Diana, called *Sapphic Passion*” (Waters 266, italics in the original). The dildo is described in detail:

It was a kind of harness, made of leather: belt-like, and yet not quite a belt, for though it had one wide strap with buckles on it, two narrower, shorter bands were fastened to this and they, too, were buckled. For one alarming moment I thought it might be a horse’s bridle; then I saw what the straps and the buckles supported. It was a cylinder of leather, rather longer than the length of my hand and about as fat, in width, as I could grip. One end was rounded and slightly enlarged, the other fixed firm to a flattened base; to this, by hoops of brass, the belt and the narrower bands were also fastened. (Waters 241)

Also, the descriptions of Nan and Diana’s sex with the dildo are very detailed, as can be seen, for example, in the following extract:

With my hands still clasped in hers [Diana’s] she led me to one of the straight-back chairs and sat me on it, the dildo all the while straining from my lap, rude and rigid as a skittle. I guessed her purpose. With her hands close-pressed about my head and her legs straddling mine, she gently lowered herself upon me; then proceeded to rise and sink, rise and sink, with an ever speedier motion. At first I held her hips, to guide them; then I returned a hand to her drawers, and let the fingers of the other creep round her thigh to her buttocks. My mouth I fastened now on one nipple, now on the other, sometimes finding the salt of her flesh, sometimes the dampening cotton of her chemise. Soon her breaths became moans, then cries; soon my own voice joined hers, for the dildo that serviced her also pleased me – her motions bringing it with an ever faster, ever harder pressure against just that part of me that cared for pressure best. (Waters 243).

The overtly sexual content of this description is obvious and it perhaps comes close to resembling pornography. This, again, clashes dramatically with Victorian ideals as women were supposed to be innocent and submitting to men’s sexual desires instead of having their own. This view also perhaps relates to the dichotomy virgin/whore, whereupon a sexually aggressive woman was considered a deviation and a threat to Victorian values and therefore labelled a whore. Also, it would not have been possible to have content as sexually aggressive as this in authentic Victorian literature so, as a postmodern writer, Waters is obviously trying to point out what might have happened in the 19th century even though it was not possible to discuss it at the time.

Furthermore, Nan admires the dildo because, in her experience from renting, men become tired after sex and cannot perform it again straight away. However, the dildo “was as indecently rigid and

ready as before – *that* never happened with the gents in Soho” (Waters 244, italics in the original). This seems to suggest that lesbians do not need men to satisfy them sexually because that can be done even without a male-sexed body with the help of a dildo, which is an even better option because, unlike a man, a dildo will always be ready for sex. This could be considered a threat to the patriarchy because a dildo results in some women not needing a man at all. Martin (81) asserts that Butler’s concept of the lesbian phallus shows that because of the dildo, the phallus can be taken from male-sexed bodies and attached to anyone: “That, which is supposed to organize the terms of sexual difference becomes plastic, mobile, subject to substitution, and attached to the figure of the lesbian”. Thus, the phallus is not the exclusive property of male-sexed bodies anymore but, rather, becomes mobile and attachable to a female-sexed body as well. Furthermore, Creed (94) argues that even if a lesbian’s, like any woman’s, body “signifies only castration and lack”, this lack “can be overcome artificially by the use of a dildo”, and goes on to point out that “the phallic woman, who straps on a dildo and sodomizes the male, is a popular figure in pornography”.

It is interesting that, as Halberstam (1998, 51) pointed out, it was the masculine woman in particular that was considered threatening and sexually aggressive in the nineteenth century. It was the masculine woman that was thought to have supposedly unnatural desires and the need to pursue these desires. Halberstam (1997, 330) argues about nineteenth-century relationships between woman that “the mannish lesbian makes desire between women visible and potent and rescues lesbianism from the asexual pit of romantic friendship”. It is true that Nan is the masculine-looking woman in this relationship as well – she even lives as a boy with Diana – but it is actually Diana who has the secret trunk containing the dildo and the other erotic material, who knows what to do with them, and who has the insatiable need for sex, so much so that she wants to hire a personal “tart”, as she refers to Nan (Waters 248). Diana is not described as masculine or butch-looking. She wears dresses and jewellery and “was like a queen, with her own queer court” (Waters 282). Hence, despite being powerful like a ruler and having qualities that are perhaps often attached to men, her

appearances are not mannish in any way. Waters seems to be suggesting that it is stereotypical to only attach passion and desire to the masculine-looking women of the era while it is also possible that other women and lesbians of the time were sexually active as well. On the other hand, it is pointed out in the novel that Nan, because of her masculinity, is the visible sign of her and Diana's desire:

We were a perfect kind of double act. She [Diana] was lewd, she was daring – but who made that daring visible? Who could testify to the passion of her; to the sympathetic power of her; to the rare, enchanted atmosphere of her house in Felicity Place, where ordinary ways and rules seemed all suspended, and wanton riot reigned? Who, but I? I was proof of all her pleasures. I was the stain left by her lust. (Waters 282)

Thus, even though it is Diana who fashions her and Nan's sex life, it is nevertheless Nan who is considered the visible sign of it because of her masculine looks that are quite different from any other lesbians in Diana's circle of friends.

Yet another instance of the roles being reversed is when Diana's Sapphic friends treat Nan as a sex object – in other words, they treat Nan like men perhaps would. They admire Nan as if she was “a statue or a clock” instead of a woman (Waters 277). All through Nan's relationship with Diana, Nan is not considered one of Diana's many friends but instead she is her “find” and her servant – something to keep Diana's friends and Diana herself entertained (Waters 277). This setting is quite interesting because Nan is the only overtly masculine woman among Diana's acquaintances. The novel presents the masculine Nan as merely the object of sexual desire, who cannot herself decide how and when she will have sex, and the group of Diana's feminine friends as a mass of lusting and insatiable lesbians. It is often the case that femininity is likened with passivity and being reduced to an object while masculinity is portrayed as active. Here, the situation is quite the contrary.

In conclusion, Nan and Diana's sexual relationship, in describing the two women's sexual desires as active and aggressive, seems to break away from the view of nineteenth-century lesbianism as asexual. At the same time, however, it enforces the views of contemporary pornography of lesbianism as insatiable and the possible object of male sexual fantasies. Nan and

Diana's relationship finally ends when Nan opposes to Diana by mocking her friends, telling her not to talk to her in a controlling way, and finally having sex with one of Diana's female servants. As a result, Diana throws Nan out and thus maintains her power over her until the very end. The following subchapter discusses Nan's final relationship to a social worker called Florence. Florence takes care of a baby, and thus this relationship will be examined as an example of a lesbian family.

4.3 Lesbian Family

Traditionally, the ideal family type has been the so called monolithic or nuclear family that consists of a breadwinner husband and his (house)wife and children. As mentioned in the theory section, this ideal was especially important in the 19th century when, furthermore, motherhood was considered the most important feminine role. However, as Thorne (1) points out, from the 1970s onwards "the family has emerged as a political issue". Nowadays the divorce rates are high, there is an increase in single-parent families as well as people living on their own, and most married women and mothers work (Thorne 1). Moreover, the number of so called rainbow families that consist of two mothers or two fathers and their children has increased, or at least these kinds of families have become more visible in the 21st century. Legislation concerning the family has changed as well and same-sex couples can now register their civil partnership in many countries and in some countries also adopt each other's children. In some countries, same-sex couples can also adopt children outside their own family. Hence, the concept of the family has changed drastically since the Victorian era, and continues to do so. According to Thorne (2), "feminists have challenged beliefs that any specific family arrangement is natural, biological, or 'functional' in a timeless way" and, perhaps as a result, alternative family arrangements have become more and more common.

Even though rainbow families as we understand them now did not exist in the Victorian era, it is still quite possible that there were families with more than one mother and/or father, whether they were in a relationship with each other or not. As I pointed out in the theory section, in the 19th

century working-class people often lived in cramped houses with many men, women and children in the same household, and thus their view of family was perhaps not so confined to biology. In other words, it is quite possible that working-class Victorians thought of the people they lived with as family, whether they were related or not. This kind of living arrangements are reflected in *Tipping the Velvet* when Nan moves in with Florence, her brother Ralph and the baby they are taking care of as their own, Cyril. When Nan and Florence eventually become a couple, the more contemporary idea of rainbow families becomes apparent and is discussed, although here placed in the 19th century. It seems that Waters wants to point out that even though some of the ideas that she deals with in the novel, such as the closet and the lesbian family, may seem like contemporary phenomena, they are actually topics that have been relevant for a long time. By placing these ideas in the 19th century, Waters is arguing that it is possible they actually existed in the Victorian times as well – it simply was not possible to discuss them at the time because of the prevailing norms. The purpose of this final subchapter is to examine Nan and Florence’s relationship as an example of a lesbian family.

According to Thorne (11), since the 19th century, if not earlier, “motherhood has been glorified as women’s chief vocation and central definition” and “the tie between mother and child has been exalted, and traits of nurturance, selflessness and altruism have been defined as the essence of the maternal, and hence, of the womanly”. Mothering indeed becomes an important issue in Nan and Florence’s relationship. It is not necessarily glorified, but Florence does love baby Cyril very much and would not consider giving him up even though he is not related to her. Cyril’s biological mother is a woman called Lilian that died giving birth to him. Florence was in love with Lilian but since Lilian was not a lesbian, the two were only friends until Lilian’s death. It is important for Florence to take care of Cyril because he is all she has left of Lilian:

‘Cyril ain’t mine,’ she [Florence] said quickly, ‘though I call him mine. His mother used to lodge with us, and we took him on when she – left us. He is very dear to us, now...’ (Waters 357)

Furthermore, Florence is described as a kind of madonna figure on several occasions - quite unlike the whore-like depictions of Nan and Diana's sexual behaviour, for example. In the following extract, Nan knocks on Florence's door and Florence opens it:

It was Florence herself who stood there – looking remarkably as she had when I had seen her first, peering into the darkness, framed against the light and with the same glorious halo of burning hair. I gave a sigh that was also a shudder – then I saw a movement at her hip, and saw what she carried there. It was a baby. (Waters 346-347)

In other words, Florence with her golden halo-resembling hair, holding a baby looks remarkably like a madonna and child painting would. A similar description, although without the baby, can be found later in the novel when Florence takes a towel from her head and “her hair was spread out over the bit of lace on the back of her chair, like the halo on a Flemish madonna” (Waters 402). Thus, it becomes obvious that Florence is likened to the image of the respectable woman as far as the 19th century dichotomy madonna/whore goes. As mentioned in the theory section, “throughout the nineteenth century the differences between the ‘respectable’ and the ‘fallen’ were defined and redefined in an attempt to create clear moral boundaries and to prevent any possibility of confusion” and, as a result, women's roles were limited to those of mother and prostitute (Nead 6). Florence is indeed the madonna-like mother figure who selflessly takes on the baby of another woman. However, Florence does work as well and while she is unavailable, neighbours and sometimes Ralph mind baby Cyril. Thus, unlike a respectable 19th century woman, Florence does not commit herself to motherhood only but instead has other things to keep her occupied as well.

Furthermore, Nan is also put in the role of the mother in the final part of the novel. The circumstances in which Nan moves in with Florence, Ralph and Cyril are such that Nan has been thrown out of Diana's mansion and does not have a place to go. She remembers Florence, who she once met on the street, and decides to ask her if she could live with her for a while. Florence is not happy about this at first but finally agrees when Nan offers to do housework and take care of Cyril while Florence and Ralph are at work. Hence, suddenly Nan becomes the person who spends the

most time with the baby. Nan is, furthermore, good at taking care of Cyril. In the following extract, Nan is trying to convince Florence about letting her stay:

Florence struggled with Cyril for a moment: he was squirming and fractious and about to cry. I went to her, and - with terrible boldness, for the last baby I had held had been my cousin's child, four years before: and he had screamed in my face - I said, 'Give him to me, babies love me.' She handed him over and, through some extraordinary miracle - perhaps I was holding him so inexpertly, the grip quite stunned him - he fell against my shoulder, and sighed, and grew calm. (Waters 372)

Nan also, for example, sings for Cyril and, when in the park with him, carries him on her shoulders and walks hand in hand with him. Thus, despite her outward masculinity, Nan is still described as a woman with motherly feelings and abilities. The way Nan holds Cyril and manages to calm him down, even to her own surprise, seems to come naturally to her. In other words, Nan seems to possess a mother's instinctive ability to be natural with children even though her appearances might suggest otherwise.

As Jeremiah (140) argues, the household formed by Nan, Florence, Cyril and Ralph "offers a model of alternative kinship" that emphasises the non-biological aspect of family and that is perhaps more of a postmodern phenomenon than a Victorian one when taking Nan and Florence's lesbian relationship into consideration. Moreover, the non-biological aspect of family is apparent in the fact that Cyril now has two mothers, neither of whom is actually related to him. It is clear from the way Nan and Florence behave around the baby that they both consider themselves to be his mothers. They automatically share their duties as mothers: "There was an empty seat next to Florence, and when I [Nan] had made my way across the grass I sat in it and took the baby from her" (Waters 452). They do not need to discuss whose turn it is to look after Cyril but instead they both know when he needs something and when the other one needs help with the baby. Also, it seems that Waters is arguing here that when it comes to family, biology is not important. Even though neither Nan nor Florence is related to their baby, they are nevertheless good and loving mothers.

Also, it is clear that Nan, Florence, Cyril and Ralph form a tight family and, furthermore, that the Banner family (Florence and Ralph) give great value to family. First of all, the atmosphere in their home is warm, loving and welcoming: they always have guests – both family and friends. At first Nan does not like this because she is used to the peace and quiet of Diana's mansion and she grows tired fast, but she does point out that "I had grown up in a street that was similar, in a house where cousins thundered up and down the stairs, and the parlour might be full, on any night of the week, with people drinking beer and playing cards and sometimes quarrelling" (Waters 375). In other words, for the first time since living at home with her parents in Whitstable, Nan remembers what it feels like to have an actual home, and relatives and friends around her. Later on Nan and Florence discuss the fact that Nan has completely deserted her family in Whitstable and lost contact with both her family and old friends on purpose. Florence questions Nan's behaviour and makes her see that family and friends are important and that Nan's abandoning of everyone is unforgivable:

'To think of all the people you have known – and yet you have no friends.'

'I left them all behind me.'

'Your family. You said when you came here that your family had thrown you over. But it was *you* threw *them* over! How they must wonder over you! Do you never think of them?'

'Sometimes, sometimes.'

'And the lady who was so fond of you, in Green Street. Do you never think to call on her, and her daughter?'

'They have moved away; and I tried to find them. And anyway, I was ashamed, because I had neglected them...' (Waters 430-431, italics in the original)

With Florence, Nan begins to understand the importance of family and the cruelty of her past actions. Perhaps it can be said that she is growing up and beginning to become mature as opposed to her selfish behaviour of the past. In the end she makes a commitment to Florence, telling her that she loves her and that "you and Ralph and Cyril are my family, that I could never leave – even though I was so careless with my own kin" (Waters 471). In a way, Nan and Florence's relationship is almost like marriage because, as Nan says, "we had struck a kind of bargain. We had fixed to kiss for ever" (Waters 438). Hence, the novel does not seem to criticise the institution of family, but instead attempts to redefine it. Waters seems to suggest that family, in the 19th century and today,

does not have to be exclusively reserved for heterosexual couples and their children, but instead is something that homosexual couples are entitled to as well.

Moreover, Florence's brother Ralph is also considered a natural part of the family. This probably has to do with the aforementioned fact that it was common for working-class people in the 19th century to live with several people. Thus, even though Nan and Florence are in a relationship with each other, it is possible for Ralph to live with them as a natural part of the family. Another reason why Ralph is present in this family might have to do with the fact that he provides a contrast between Nan as a masculine woman, and a male-sexed man, thus drawing attention to the fact that even though Nan looks masculine, she is still female, and even a mother now, while Ralph is actually male.

In addition, the idea of family is further discussed in the way Florence does not want to hide her sexual identity, unlike Kitty who was afraid of being exposed all the time and made Nan hide her sexual identity as well. Instead, Florence is proud of who she is and refuses to for example cover her relationship to another woman to please her other brother Frank, who is not quite as accepting of tommistry as is Ralph. When Frank is going to pay a visit and Nan hears that he does not accept lesbianism, she has a suggestion:

'We can pretend it's otherwise, if you like,' I said. 'We can bring the truckle-bed back, and pretend –'

She [Florence] leaned away from me as if I had sworn at her. 'Pretend? Pretend, and in my own house? If Frank doesn't like my habits, he can stop visiting. Him, and anyone else with a similar idea. Would you have people think we were ashamed?' (Waters 434)

Hence, the fact that Florence is out and not interested in hiding her sexual identity makes it possible for Nan and Florence to have an out relationship and thus live as a family, just like everyone else. In other words, Waters seems to argue that only when one has accepted their sexual identity can one form possibly lasting relationships and live as a family in front of everyone.

Yet another thing concerning Nan and Florence as a family unit is the fact that they have a fixed circle of friends that mostly consists of other female couples. They go to the pub together or visit

each other's houses regularly and discuss deep things as well as more light-hearted topics. This gives the impression of family friends. Instead of Nan and Florence each doing things on their own, they share their life and friends.

Despite Nan's masculine and Florence's more feminine appearances, there is no strict division to butch and femme roles in this relationship whereupon Nan would act as the man of the house and Florence take care of the chores traditionally allocated to women. Instead, there seems to be a certain kind of balance in this relationship as both Nan and Florence do things that might be considered masculine or feminine by some. In a way, then, this relationship deconstructs the idea of strict butch/femme roles and gives way to a more liberal reading of lesbianism. First of all, as mentioned earlier, Florence is a social worker and she spends most of her time working, even till late in the night. In the daytime she is at work so Nan, the masculine woman, takes on the role of the housewife. She cooks for the family, cleans and takes care of baby Cyril. The idea of being a wife is even mentioned in passing when Nan is trying to convince Florence to let her stay:

'I could clean and cook, like I did today. I could do your washing.' I was growing more rash and desperate as I spoke. 'Oh, how I longed to do those things, when I was in the house in St John's Wood! But that devil [Diana] I lived with said I must let the servants do it - that it would spoil my hands. But if I stayed here - well, I could look after your little boy while you're at work. *I wouldn't give him laudanum when he cried!*'

Now Florence's eyes were wider than ever. 'Clean and do my washing? Look after Cyril? I'm sure I couldn't let you do all those things!'

'Why not? I met fifty women in your street today, all doing exactly those things! It's natural, ain't it? If I was your wife - or Ralph's wife, I mean - I should certainly do them then.'
(Waters 371, italics in the original)

This extract presents a vision of Nan as another woman's wife, doing the chores typically assigned for a working-class housewife in the 19th century. Despite her apparent masculinity, Nan is still willing to be a housewife instead of for example demanding to be the man of the house and refusing to clean, cook and take care of a baby. In fact, she even thinks it is natural that a woman does these chores. Similarly, Nan is described as motherly when she is home alone with Cyril: "I collected the cups, and took Cyril into the kitchen with me; and while I waited for the kettle to boil I sang him an old song from the music hall, which made him kick his legs and gurgle" (Waters 378). Nan also

takes care of Florence and helps her with her guild and union work so that she does not wear herself out by working too much, and she also makes sure that Florence eats well. However, Nan is perhaps masculine in that she is not afraid to take the initiative when needed. For example, Ralph is supposed to give a speech at the Workers' Rally but when the time comes for the speech, he cannot do it. This is when Nan steps on the stage with him to help him out. Hence, Nan looks masculine but regardless is in the role of a housewife and a full-time mother. However, she also takes the initiative when needed, like a man perhaps. Florence, on the other hand, looks feminine but works and is thus the breadwinner of the household in addition to Ralph. At the same time, however, she is perhaps typically feminine in that she is even too conscientious a worker, devoting all her time to helping others. Hence, there is a certain kind of balance present in this relationship. Neither of the two women is radically feminine or radically masculine but instead they both possess feminine and masculine qualities. Moreover, they are not defined by their appearances. This is very different compared to Nan's previous relationships where Nan has always been in the even excessively masculine role.

Similarly, Florence's appearances emphasise the fact that it is not always easy to read lesbianism. At first, it is difficult for Nan to decide whether Florence is a tom or not because she looks and acts unlike masculine lesbians:

'She really can't be a tom,' I would say to myself – for, if she never flirted with me, then there were plenty of other girls who passed through our parlour, and I never saw her flirt with a single one of them, not once. But then, I never saw her flirting with a fellow, either. At last, I supposed she was too good to fall in love with anyone. (Waters 380)

This extract further reinforces the idea that lesbians can and often do balance femininity and masculinity instead of limiting themselves to strict gender roles.

Nan and Florence's relationship seems more mature and balanced than Nan's previous relationships in many ways. For the first time, Nan is really settling down with one person and learning to care about other people, even becoming an altruistic mother figure. There is also a certain kind of balance between love and passion in this relationship when for example with Diana

Nan was only interested in the sexual aspect of the relationship. When with Diana Nan only felt something between her thighs, now she is also feeling something in her heart, for the first time since Kitty: I “felt a curious movement in my own breast, a kind of squirming or turning, or flexing, that I seemed not to have felt for a thousand years. It was followed almost immediately by a similar sensation, rather lower down...With every breath I took away from her, the movement at my heart and between my legs grew more defined” (Waters 403). Furthermore, with Florence, Nan feels that she “might have been eighteen again, sweating and anxious” even though she has been shameless with Diana in the past and thus should have no reason to feel insecure about having sex with someone (Waters 407). Hence, Nan and Florence’s relationship is not just about sex but instead they are in love and balancing their romantic and sexual feelings towards each other. Also, unlike ever before, when Nan and Florence become a couple, they move into the same bedroom as a couple. Even though Nan did sleep in the same bed with Kitty, no one knew about their relationship and even when they moved away alone, Nan had to keep her nightgown under the pillow in her own bed so as not to make the maid suspicious. With Diana, on the other hand, Nan had no ordinary kind of relationship and she was always sent to her own bed after sex. Hence, the fact that Nan and Florence now openly share a bedroom is a big step for Nan - it is, in a way, a sign of commitment. Finally, Nan and Florence talk about each other’s lives and share their thoughts and secrets in a mature way, which is again something Nan has not experienced in her previous relationships. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that once a person has accepted themselves, there is no need to have secrets anymore and thus it is possible to be in an honest and mature relationship. At the end of the novel, Nan is finally ready to leave her past behind and start anew in a balanced relationship with Florence.

But is balance only to be found in a relationship or family model that resembles heterosexuality? After all, the novel ends in Nan finding balance and happiness in a steady girlfriend, a baby and a permanent home – a vision that easily brings the heterosexual family model

to mind. Is this a way of reinforcing Victorian family ideals? Or is it merely a way of indicating that there is not such a big difference between heterosexual and homosexual relationships after all? Do we all aspire to settle down with a family? Regardless of what the answers to these questions might be, the end result in *Tipping the Velvet* is that Nan is now a masculine woman who accepts her lesbian identity; a non-biological mother to a baby boy; and in a balanced and public relationship with another woman.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the representation of lesbianism in Sarah Waters's novel *Tipping the Velvet*. The main reasons why I considered this topic relevant were that, on one hand, this novel had not yet been analysed in detail and, on the other, I consider it important to further discuss the representation of sexual minority groups in literature as opposed to always concentrating on heterosexuality. The theoretical framework for this study was provided by both queer theory as well as historical background concerning women, marriage and sexuality in the Victorian era.

In examining the representation of lesbianism in the novel, I adopted two different viewpoints. In the first analysis chapter, I concentrated on female masculinity and, in particular, the individual growth of the main character Nan towards finding and accepting her identity as a masculine lesbian. Female masculinity was discussed as theatrical performance, passing and posing as man, and finally as a certain kind of lesbian identity. In the second analysis chapter, the focus was then shifted to lesbian relationships whereupon Nan's three relationships were discussed, respectively, as examples of closeted romantic friendship, sexual relationship and lesbian family.

The theme of female masculinity is presented through theatrical performance at the beginning on the novel. In the context of theatre, there are several ways in which masculinity is produced and performed by women in the novel. First of all, Nan and Kitty dress up in men's clothes and have short hair in order to look masculine. They, furthermore, create masculinity through their gestures and manners on stage. They adopt these manners by studying men in the streets of London and then imitating their behaviour in their performance. Nan and Kitty also have masculine stage names to complete their act, and they sing songs that are meant to be sung by men to women. Because it is possible to thus reproduce masculinity through dress and behaviour, the novel suggests that masculinity cannot be the exclusive property of male-sexed bodies. Instead, it can be attached to female-sexed bodies as well, and thus it can be argued that gender is not a fixed category but instead can be constructed, accordingly with queer theory.

Furthermore, when Nan walks the streets of London disguised as a man, she is able to pass without people noticing she is actually female. This time her masculinity is even more obvious than in the theatre and, in addition to the outfits and hair, she also wears a rolled handkerchief or sock in her trousers to create the impression of having a penis, and she uses bandages to make her chest look flat. Nan manages to pass successfully and, therefore, the novel again seems to suggest that masculinity cannot be attached exclusively to male-sexed bodies but instead can be created by women as well.

The reasons for Nan's passing are many. First of all, the masculine outfit grants Nan freedom of movement in the streets of London at a time when urban space was essentially male. Furthermore, Nan wants to hide herself from Kitty, who has betrayed her by marrying their manager Walter. Finally, later, when Nan starts working as a male prostitute, her passing gains the meaning of humiliating men through granting them sexual favours disguised as a man when she is, in fact, female.

Later on with Diana, Nan's masculine roles gain yet another meaning, namely that of pleasing the lesbian desires of Diana and her lesbian friends. Diana dresses her up in various boy roles and then dramatically reveals her, leaving her lesbian friends gasping and excited. Thus, Nan poses as man because it excites the upper-class lesbians in the novel. Also, being masculine makes Nan feel good about herself as she likes the way she looks when dressed up in her many masculine outfits.

Through performance, Nan slowly comes into terms with her sexual identity as a masculine lesbian. Female masculinity, in both Kitty and herself, excites her sexually, but in the Victorian age women were not supposed to be masculine, and lesbianism was certainly undesirable. The theatrical performance of masculinity, then, allows Nan to be masculine in front of other people but still disguise her own sexual identity when she is only just beginning to come to terms with it. Also, being masculine makes Nan like herself more as it makes her feel good and confident. Hence, there

is a clear connection between female masculinity and lesbian identity in the novel. Nan's sexual identity seems to go towards what we could now perceive as butchness.

With Kitty, Nan has to keep her sexual identity a secret and so she does not know any other lesbians in addition to herself and Kitty. However, with Diana, Nan becomes a part of a certain kind of upper-class lesbian community. While Nan remains a performer amidst Diana's friends, she nevertheless realises that there are other lesbians out there and thus she cannot be abnormal or deviant because of her desires. This realisation makes it easier for Nan to accept her sexual identity as it is important for her to know she is not the only lesbian, or a masculine lesbian, there is.

In the final part of the novel, Nan tries to return to femininity once more but fails at it. Instead of feeling comfortable in a feminine outfit, she feels disgusted and, as a result, decides to stop pretending and embrace masculinity as part of herself, also in front of other people. This decision grants Nan a sense of freedom and relief as she no longer has to hide her identity. Hence, the idea of coming out becomes relevant. However, it is not easy for Nan to show her identity to everyone and thus her transformation from femininity to masculinity happens gradually. Furthermore, she is shy and afraid of what people might think of her when previously, when disguised as a man, she has been rather bold and confident about her appearances. However, the fact that the people around Nan – Florence's lesbian friends and the working-class people of Bethnal Green - are accepting of her masculinity makes it easier for her to be who she is in public. Also, with Florence, Nan starts going to a lesbian pub where she meets other masculine lesbians. Realising that there are other very masculine women out there again makes it easier for Nan to finally accept her identity as a masculine lesbian because now, instead of being alone, she can think of herself as a part of a certain kind of lesbian community. Thus, in the end, Nan finds a way to balance her previous roles: she is not the traditionally feminine woman that she was in Whitstable nor does she play the part of a man like she did in the music halls and with Diana. Instead, she is a mixture of both genders – a masculine lesbian woman.

The question of lesbian relationships is discussed through three different relationships in the novel: closeted romantic friendship, sexual relationship and lesbian family. Nan and Kitty's relationship provides an example of closeted romantic friendship where the two first hide their feelings from each other and then from everyone else. Relationships between women in the nineteenth century have often been labelled asexual, which has led to the romantic friendship model. However, because it has been argued that it is likely these relationships actually contained sex in secret, romantic friendship comes to resemble the more contemporary concept of the closet. Nan and Kitty have a sex life, albeit in secret, and, because of this, it seems that Waters is in fact opposing the asexual model of 19th-century lesbianism and thus attempting to rewrite lesbian history from a postmodern point of view, granting lesbians visibility and giving them a history. However, Nan and Kitty have to maintain the illusion of heterosexuality and keep their relationship in the closet for Kitty's fear of losing her job and reputation. This is done in several ways: all intimacy has to stop when it sounds like someone is coming; the girls have no contact with other lesbian couples so as not to be exposed; and, finally, Kitty even agrees to marry Walter for cover.

Nan and Diana's relationship is an example of a sexual relationship in the novel. This relationship is solely based on sex, and romantic feelings are not allowed. Nan and Diana have aggressive sex and even use a strap-on dildo while Diana has complete control over Nan and is able to force her to do whatever she wants. The description of this relationship therefore differs drastically from Victorian ideals whereupon women were supposed to be passive as well as innocent and sexually ignorant. On the contrary, Nan and Diana do not succumb to any man's desires but, instead, have desires of their own, as well as the means to fulfil them. This view of lesbianism as sexually aggressive conforms to the stereotypical 19th-century ideas of the lesbian body as both sexually insatiable and even monstrous. Furthermore, in the 19th century, it was the masculine woman that was often believed to have aggressive sexual tendencies. Nan is, at this point, living as Diana's "boy", and looks overtly masculine, thus further conforming to the

stereotypical views of lesbianism in the 19th century. Hence, this relationship, while opposing the views of 19th-century lesbianism as merely asexual romantic friendship, also conforms to stereotypical views of the lesbianism as insatiable and sexually aggressive.

Finally, I discussed Nan and Florence's relationship as an example of a lesbian family. Nan and Florence form a balanced relationship as the non-biological parents of a baby. Their relationship emphasises the altruistic nature of motherhood because even though neither of them is baby Cyril's biological mother, they nevertheless prioritise his care and share their duties as mothers. As mothers, Nan and Florence also adopt the respectable task reserved for Victorian women, and also the more contemporary issue of lesbian motherhood is discussed: despite not being related to Cyril and being a lesbian couple, Nan and Florence are portrayed as good and loving mothers. Furthermore, this relationship sees Nan, the masculine lesbian, as a mother. Thus, Waters seems to argue that even a masculine woman can have feminine qualities and a mother's instincts. Also, Nan and Florence's relationship bears a strong resemblance to a heterosexual family, consisting of two parents and their child. This might either endorse the heterosexual family model or argue that heterosexual and homosexual families are not so different after all.

It should be pointed out that the character of Nan is not completely defined by her lesbianism in the novel. Towards the end, she comes to terms with her identity as a masculine lesbian and finds herself in a balanced relationship with Florence, but she also becomes politically conscious, taking part in the socialist Workers' Rally and being asked to write more speeches for similar events. Furthermore, Nan's coming out as a lesbian is linked with her political awareness when she steps out as herself to give a speech for workers' rights. Hence, in the end, Nan finds her calling in more than one way as she plans to devote her life to Florence as well as social work and caring about others.

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