

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2026.v8n1.15>

Sexuality as Performance: Theatricality and Queer Expression

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Abstract:

This paper explores *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters through the lens of queer aesthetics, focusing on sexuality as performance and the role of theatricality in expressing queer identity. Set in the vibrant world of Victorian music halls, the novel presents gender and sexuality not as fixed categories but as fluid performances shaped by costume, gesture, and public spectacle. Nancy Astley's transformation from an oyster girl to a male impersonator illustrates how desire and identity are enacted through theatrical roles. Cross-dressing, stage performance, and erotic display become tools through which queer characters negotiate visibility, pleasure, and resistance within a restrictive social order. By foregrounding performance as a mode of self-expression, Waters challenges Victorian norms of femininity and heterosexuality while celebrating queer desire as creative and empowering. The novel thus reveals how theatrical spaces function as sites of both personal liberation and political subversion, where marginalized identities find voice through aesthetic expression.

Keywords: Queer aesthetics, performance, theatricality, gender fluidity, Victorian culture

Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is a landmark text in contemporary queer historical fiction. Set in Victorian England, the novel narrates the life of Nancy Astley, a young woman who discovers her lesbian identity through the world of music hall performance and male impersonation (Waters). Water(s) reconstructs a hidden queer past by presenting sexuality not as a fixed biological essence but as something performed, displayed, and negotiated through theatricality, costume, and spectacle (Butler,44).

The paper examines how *Tipping the Velvet* represents sexuality as performance and explores how theatrical spaces enable queer expression. Drawing on queer aesthetics, the novel shows that gender and desire are fluid, staged, and socially constructed (Halberstam,144). Through cross-dressing, drag performance, and erotic spectacle, Waters challenges Victorian

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norms of gender and sexuality while celebrating queer visibility and pleasure (Sedgwick,89). The novel thus uses theatricality not merely as a narrative device, but as a political and aesthetic tool for reimagining queer identity.

Queer aesthetics refers to artistic expressions that challenge heterosexual norms and explore non-normative identities, desires, and bodies. It often includes elements such as camp, drag, performance, theatrical exaggeration, and fluid gender presentation (Meyer,110-111). Central to queer theory is Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not innate but constructed through repeated actions, gestures, and performances (Butler, 98). In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters applies this idea to both gender and sexuality. The novel suggests that identity is shaped through performance - on stage and in everyday life. Clothing, posture, voice, and public display become tools through which characters express and explore their desires. Rather than hiding queer sexuality, Waters presents it as something visible, theatrical, and aesthetically rich (Sedgwick, 22). The Victorian music hall becomes a symbolic space where rigid social rules are temporarily suspended. Here, queer identities can be enacted, admired, and even celebrated (Showalter, 90). Performance becomes a way of experimenting with selfhood and desire.

The music hall is central to the novel's exploration of sexuality as performance. It is a space of spectacle, fantasy, and transformation. When Nancy first encounters Kitty Butler, a male impersonator, she is captivated not only by Kitty's performance but by the possibility of alternative gender expression (Butler, 171). Kitty's act involves wearing men's clothing, adopting masculine gestures, and performing romantic songs to female audiences. This performance blurs the boundaries between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual (Halberstam, 99). The audience's admiration of Kitty reveals a hidden desire for gender ambiguity and same-sex attraction. For Nancy, the music hall becomes the place where she first recognizes her lesbian desire. Her attraction to Kitty is inseparable from Kitty's performance. Desire itself becomes theatrical - expressed through gazes, costumes, and staged romance. The stage allows Nancy to imagine a different kind of life beyond Victorian domestic expectations. The music hall thus functions as a queer space where identity is not fixed but performed. It offers freedom, visibility, and the chance to rewrite social norms.

Cross-dressing is one of the most important aesthetic and symbolic elements in *Tipping the Velvet*. Nancy's transformation into a male impersonator shows how clothing can reshape identity. When she wears men's suits on stage, she experiences a sense of confidence and agency that she never had before (Butler, 38). Men's clothing allows Nancy to move freely in public spaces, access male privilege, and express desire openly (Halberstam, 227). Her masculine appearance does not erase her femininity; instead, it creates a fluid identity that challenges rigid gender roles. Nancy becomes both masculine and feminine, revealing gender as a performance rather than a biological truth. Through drag performance, Waters shows that gender is not natural but theatrical. The audience applauds Nancy's masculine persona, proving that gender is something that can be learned, displayed, and enjoyed (Meyer,78). This aligns with queer aesthetics, which celebrate artificiality, exaggeration, and performance. Cross-

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dressing also becomes erotic. Nancy's lovers are attracted to her masculine presentation, showing how desire is shaped by visual and performative cues rather than fixed sexual categories.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, sexuality is not private or hidden—it is often public, visible, and performative. Romantic and sexual encounters are closely linked to theatrical spaces and aesthetic display. Nancy's relationship with Kitty begins as part of their stage act. They perform flirtation and romance for the audience, but eventually this performance becomes real. Their love is born out of spectacle, showing how desire can emerge through performance. Later, Nancy's involvement with Diana Lethaby introduces a more erotic and fetishized form of performance. Diana dresses Nancy in masculine outfits and treats her as an object of desire. Nancy becomes a living spectacle, performing sexuality for Diana's pleasure. This reflects how queer desire can be shaped by power, fantasy, and visual display. Even when Nancy lives as a rent boy on the streets, she continues to perform an identity. Her survival depends on maintaining a masculine appearance that attracts male clients. Sexuality here becomes transactional and theatrical, revealing how identity is shaped by social conditions (Showalter, 115). Waters presents sexuality as something that is seen, performed, and consumed—rather than something purely emotional or private.

The novel shows that identity is formed through repeated performances. Nancy does not discover her “true self” instantly. Instead, she experiments with different roles—oyster girl, performer, lover, kept woman, and political activist (Waters, 287). Each stage of her life involves a different performance of gender and sexuality. On stage, she performs masculinity. With Diana, she performs erotic dominance. With Florence, she performs emotional intimacy and equality. These shifting roles show that identity is flexible and context-dependent. Nancy's sexuality is not a fixed label but a series of expressions shaped by environment, relationships, and power (Halberstam, 266). Theatricality allows Nancy to explore who she is. It gives her the freedom to try on different selves. Through performance, she learns what kind of love and life she wants. Waters suggests that queer identity is not about finding an inner essence but about creating oneself through action and expression.

Queer aesthetics in *Tipping the Velvet* are deeply connected to visual pleasure. The novel focuses on how bodies are seen, admired, and desired. Costumes, gestures, and physical appearance play a crucial role in shaping attraction. Nancy is attracted to Kitty not just emotionally, but visually. Kitty's masculine clothing and confident stage presence make her desirable. Similarly, Diana's attraction to Nancy is based on her appearance as a “boy” (Halberstam, 45). The gaze becomes a powerful tool in queer expression. Women look at women, desire them, and take pleasure in their visibility. This challenges the traditional male gaze of Victorian society, where women were usually objects rather than subjects of desire. By centering lesbian desire, Waters rewrites visual culture from a queer perspective. Female bodies are no longer passive - they are active participants in desire and performance. The visual emphasis reflects queer aesthetics, which celebrate spectacle, beauty, and stylized self-presentation.

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The novel also shows how performance is influenced by class and power. Nancy's ability to perform different identities depends on her social position. As a working-class girl, she initially uses performance to escape poverty. When she becomes Diana's companion, her performance is controlled by wealth and dominance. Diana decides how Nancy dresses, behaves, and presents herself (Sedgwick, 111). Sexuality becomes a performance shaped by power. Later, Nancy's involvement with Florence introduces a more equal form of queer expression. Their relationship is less theatrical and more emotionally grounded. This shift shows that performance can either reinforce or challenge power structures. Waters suggests that queer expression is not always liberating. It can also be shaped by inequality, exploitation, and control.

One of the most significant aspects of *Tipping the Velvet* is its reimagining of Victorian sexual history. Traditional Victorian literature often erased or silenced queer identities. Waters, however, places lesbian desire at the center of her narrative. By using theatrical spaces and performance, she creates a believable historical context for queer visibility. The music hall, private clubs, and urban streets become sites where alternative sexualities can exist. Waters shows that queer people were not absent from history—they were simply hidden. Through aesthetic reconstruction, she brings these identities into the light. This historical rewriting is itself a form of performance. The novel performs a new version of the past—one that includes queer voices, desires, and experiences.

Performance in *Tipping the Velvet* is not just personal—it is political (Butler,34). By challenging gender norms and displaying same-sex desire, queer performance becomes a form of resistance (Sedgwick,81). Nancy's male impersonation disrupts Victorian ideas of femininity. Her relationships with women challenge heterosexual marriage. Her public visibility questions the idea that queer sexuality should remain private (Waters, 266). The novel suggests that visibility itself is a political act. When queer bodies are seen and celebrated, they challenge dominant norms. Theatricality allows marginalized identities to claim space. The stage becomes a platform for queer expression, empowerment, and community.

Tipping the Velvet presents sexuality as performance through its rich use of theatricality, costume, and spectacle. Sarah Waters shows that gender and desire are not fixed truths but creative expressions shaped by social context, visual culture, and power. Through Nancy Astley's journey, the novel explores how queer identity is formed through repeated performances—on stage, in relationships, and in daily life. The music hall becomes a space of freedom, while cross-dressing challenges rigid gender roles. Sexuality is portrayed as visible, aesthetic, and deeply connected to performance. By rewriting Victorian history through a queer lens, Waters celebrates queer desire while exposing its complexities. The novel reveals that performance can be both liberating and controlling, joyful and painful. Ultimately, *Tipping the Velvet* affirms that queer expression is not hidden in silence but alive in spectacle, style, and theatrical self-creation.

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