

PROSTITUTION, IDENTITY AND THE NEO-VICTORIAN: SARAH WATERS'S *TIPPING THE VELVET**

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is set in the last decades of the nineteenth century and its two lesbian protagonists are given voice as the marginalised and "the other." Judith Butler's notion of gender performance is taken to its extremes in a story where male prostitution is exerted by a lesbian woman who behaves and dresses like a man. Therefore, drawing from Butler's theories on gender performance and Elisabeth Grosz's idea about bodily inscriptions, this article will address Victorian and contemporary discourses connected with the notions of identity and agency as the result of sexual violence and gender abuse.

KEYWORDS: violence, prostitution, *Tipping the Velvet*, bodily inscriptions, performance, Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz.

RESUMEN

La novela neo-victoriana de Sarah Waters *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) está situada en las últimas décadas del siglo XIX y sus dos protagonistas lesbianas reciben voz como marginadas y «las otras». La noción de performatividad de género de Judith Butler es llevada hasta los extremos en una historia donde la prostitución masculina es ejercida por una mujer lesbiana que se comporta y se viste como un hombre. Por tanto, utilizando las teorías de Butler sobre la performatividad del género y la idea de Elisabeth Grosz sobre inscripciones corpóreas, este artículo tratará de acercarse a discursos victorianos y contemporáneos relacionados con las nociones de identidad y agencialidad como resultado de la violencia sexual y el abuso de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: violencia, prostitución, *Tipping the Velvet*, inscripciones corpóreas, performatividad, Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz.





The aim of this article is to explore issues of sexual identity and violence in the world of prostitution in the Victorian past and their reflection on our contemporary societies. In particular, the analysis of sexual abuse will be the object of discussion in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) in terms of agency and identity. Set in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the novel's two lesbian protagonists, Nan King and Kitty Butler, try to find their own place in Victorian society as women who are considered as "the other." They are given voice as the marginalised, following the Neo-Victorian trend of re-writing the history of those whose lives were not found in the mainstream historical record. Judith Butler's notion of gender performance is taken to its extremes in a story where male prostitution is exerted through a woman who behaves and dresses like a man, but who will also become the victim of sexual violence and abuse. Therefore, drawing from Butler's theories on gender identity and Elizabeth Grosz's idea of bodily inscriptions, this paper will address Victorian and contemporary discourses connected with the notions of sexual identity and agency as the result of sexual violence and gender abuse, and of the prostituted body as the site of vulnerability and dependency of "the other."

In an interview with Abigail Dennis in September 2007, Sarah Waters explained that the fascination with the Victorian period has to do with its relevance to the present. In the same interview, she stated that culture and society are provisional, temporary things, and history is a process, so that gender, sexuality and class are not fixed and change from one period to another. (Dennis 45, 48) And this is precisely what Neo-Victorian writers have tried to convey in their narratives of the nineteenth century, especially attracted by the secret and the forbidden. What they pretend to do with their fiction is the revision through the representation of silenced issues and to fill in the gaps the lack of traces and archives have left to our imagination. Accordingly, writers and readers "become fused in historical fiction, as both share the desire to read, know, interpret and repossess the past." (Heilmann and Llewellyn 139) Following Heilmann and Llewellyn, historical fiction can be interpreted as the most essential form of postmodernism because it continuously contests the very fabric of the past and, by implication, of the present. There are several aspects that we share with Victorians: our own modernity, the crisis of categories and the interest in history (141, 143); similarly, Waters states that her work shares our contemporary culture's "double vision" of the Victorians: she thinks that, on the one hand we feel that it is a period very close to us, and, on the other,

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it is completely strange because we have many stereotypes about the time which on many occasions are wrong. (Wilson 286) Therefore, Neo-Victorian writers look at the Victorian past to re-evaluate, re-write and revise the Victorian era seeking “not so much to reproduce the great Victorian culture as to establish a form of dialogue with it.” (Heiberg Madsen 105) In other words, it uses the past to bring to the present aspects of our contemporary societies which were then at the centre of debate; themes like race, criminality, gender and sexuality become the focus of analysis in Neo-Victorian texts, subverting the marginality of these deviant elements in the Victorian novel and society with the aim to approach our own present anxieties.

In this sense, Sarah Waters makes use of a historical method in her fiction that allows her to explore the social, political and sexual discourses at their initial stages, and when she reconstructs the world of Victorians, she combines historical data with literary images, detecting affinities with the present. Her aim is to trace a genealogy; she wants to bring back to the present the secret preoccupations of the Victorian mind that still haunt our present. She wants to bring to light the lives of the marginalised resorting to details, events and emotions; she talks particularly about the stories of women, lesbians, criminals and destitute people in the process of text-making. (Constantini 18-20) As a lesbian writer, Waters portrays homosexuality as normal in her novels; she is concerned about challenging “a patriarchal view of history and women’s bodies, desires and emotions within it.” She wants to make that challenge through “rewriting or at least engaging textually with the written histories of previous generations” (Llewellyn 195). Historical fiction has the power to claim a sexual plurality in the Victorian past and simultaneously to question the sexual politics of our post-modern era.

Waters herself affirms that her lesbian protagonists are capable to find ways in which to engage with their sexuality in Victorian society, at a time when the idea of lesbianism did not exist. (Dennis 41) She is interested in both the historical continuities and discontinuities that allow rich and alluring portrayals of a queer past. Consequently, queer historical novels have the important role of filling the gaps in the historical record, giving an account of possible ways of experiencing same-sex desire in Victorian England. In particular, Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* makes its readers think about similarities and differences between past and present concepts of the word *queer* and therefore reflects upon the past and present continuities and discontinuities of same-sex desire (Koolen 2010, 372-373). The presence of the lesbian issue is stressed in the novel by the continuous use of the term *queer*, which in the past had the meaning of “funny” or “strange,” but which has the connotations of “homosexual” or “deviant” in our contemporary societies. The narrative of *Tipping the Velvet* is given in retrospect in the first person from the main character’s perspective, and allows the reader to enjoy the erotically charged lesbian fantasy; although the protagonists, Nan and Kitty, keep the distance from their music-hall audience, they involve the contemporary readership in their private lesbian lives and loves (Neal 68). The very title of the novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, is a slang Victorian expression which makes allusion to an erotic activity known as *fellatio*, both practiced by heterosexual and homosexual couples. However, in the case of Sarah Waters, the words of the title clearly allude to the lesbian practice known



as *cunnilingus*.¹ The novel fights against traditional ways of ordering the past and defining identities, but it belongs to a tradition raising questions about realism and representation. It can be interpreted as a picaresque novel and a *Bildungsroman* but with a female protagonist and a lesbian tale. In fact, Nan transforms herself from an oyster-girl to a dresser and a music-hall artiste, then to a *renter*,² a sex-slave, and finally to a housewife/parent and a socialist.

To talk about gender performance, we need to revise Judith Butler's theories about sex, gender and performativity and to refer to her three major works which have influenced enormously contemporary notions of sexual identity: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Taking the tradition of theoretical thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig as a starting point, Butler wanted to question concepts of gender and sex based on binary systems. She wanted to contest the feminist notion of the 1970s that the sexes were defined by biology as male and female, and gender as masculine and feminine (Jackson 131). In *Gender Trouble* she establishes that sex and gender are cultural constructs and that the body has three dimensions: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. Anatomical sex corresponds to the body you are born with, but it does not determine one's gender or one's desire; gender is materialised through repeated performances of social enactments which are conducive to a gender identity. Later, in *Bodies that Matter*, she introduces the idea of performativity being "citational," that is, we construct sex and gender repeating practices, reproducing conventions and following norms. In the novel we find examples of how gender can be performed, especially in the context of the London music-hall of the 1880's; Kitty Butler performs through citation the male gender in her characterization as a music-hall artiste:

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. When she took the topper off —as

¹ *Cunnilingus* is an oral sex act performed on a female. It involves the use by a sex partner of the mouth, lips and tongue to stimulate the female's clitoris, vulva or vagina. A female may receive cunnilingus as part of foreplay before sexual intercourse, during intercourse, or as intercourse. The term is derived from the Latin words for the vulva (*cunnus*) and tongue (*lingua*). *Cunnilingus* may be accompanied by the insertion of finger(s) or a sex toy into the vagina, which allows for the simultaneous stimulation of the g-spot, and/or into the anus. There are numerous slang terms for *cunnilingus*, including "DATY" (for "dining at the Y"), "drinking from the furry cup" and "muff-diving." It is also commonly called "eating someone out," "eating pussy" or "licking someone out." Several common slang terms used are "giving lip," "lip service," or "tipping the velvet," a Victorian pornographic term for *cunnilingus*.

² *Renter* is the Victorian word for a young male prostitute. Those who had a more feminine appearance were known as *mary-annes*.



she did now to salute the audience with a gay “Hallo!” — one saw that her hair was cropped. (Waters 12)

Her clothes and her physical appearance are those of a male in her process of performing, citing the male gender, but her body and anatomy are female. In this male impersonation, she needs the connivance of her audience to whom she addresses. This is why in *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler develops her gender performance theory further adding that gender is not constructed by the performer alone; gender performance is carried out with an audience in mind and this implies certain aspects of theatricality.

Lesbian sexuality and its exploration is one of Sarah Waters's main concerns. As a lesbian writer, she talks very explicitly about sex, and describes sexual scenes between women trying to convey a sense of naturalness about queer desire. Her main character in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan, goes through three stages in her development as a lesbian subject: in the first stage Kitty means the awakening to same-sex desire and first love; in the second stage Diana means sexual objectification and exploitation; and in the third stage Florence represents mature love and the acquisition and recognition of a lesbian identity. Also, in this last stage, the protagonist develops a sense of community so important for the lesbian debate.

The first sexual encounter Waters describes is that between Nan and Kitty. Despite the fact that this was their first sexual experience together and the beauty of their love-making, the scene is highly erotic and their passion is purely physical. Waters wants to be very explicit, making Nan say things such as “...I felt the brush of her nipples, and of the hair between her thighs” (Waters 104) inducing to sexual excitement, but then describes sex between women, including masturbation, as a form of sexual self-gratification and the gratification of your sexual partner:

Here she was wet, and smooth as velvet. I had never, of course, touched anyone like this before- except, sometimes, myself; but it was as if I touched myself now, for the slippery hand which stroked her seemed to stroke me: I felt my drawers grow damp and warm, my own hips jerk as hers did. Soon I ceased my gentle strokings and began to rub her, rather hard. (Waters 105)

She then describes the moment of climax with “moans, groans and orgasms” (Heiberg Madsen 107). However, this relationship finishes because Kitty does not accept her lesbian identity; she wants to keep her affair with Nan secret and makes her behave just as a friend in front of people. She does not identify with the lesbian community when she says “They’re not like us, at all. They’re *tom*” (Waters 131). With her attitude, she contributes to the stigmatization of lesbian women, and Nan does not like that. Lesbian sexual desire was interpreted in the past by men under four forms: passing women like female soldiers, cross-dressed actresses, free women and romantic friendships; in the nineteenth century, the mannish lesbian established her primary emotional and sexual commitment to women and was the forerunner of the twentieth-century butch (Vicinus 473-477); *tom* and *tommish* were terms used in Victorian times to refer to lesbians, and Kitty cannot bear to be identified with



that on the music-hall stage. Thus, she decides to seek protection and normalization from mainstream society by marrying her manager Walter Bliss.

The end of the relationship with Kitty brings about Nan's first crisis in the novel. She is on her own and she dresses up as a boy to avoid being accosted by men when walking about the streets in the West End. She has contact for the first time with the London underworld and the world of prostitution. Again, Sarah Waters talks openly about an issue which was considered as the Great Social Evil by Victorians.³ Prostitution and its regulation was the object of debate in all the social and cultural discourses of the time, and Waters makes reference to "the gay girls of the Haymarket" and "the lavatories in Picadilly," the Soho and its "houses bearing signs that advertised *Beds Let By The Hour*," Leicester Square or the Burlington Arcade. However, male prostitution, the same as homosexuality, was a muted discourse, and Waters, once more, tries to give a voice to those "deviant" elements of society ignored by history. Because of her male aspect, Nan is taken for a *renter*, and she makes use of her capacity as a male impersonator to behave like a proper male prostitute. This time is Nan who performs the male gender, dressing and behaving as a man in a Butlerian citational sense. Her services are requested in the following words: "Put your pretty arse-hole at my service- or your pretty lips, perhaps. Or simply your pretty white hand, through the slit in my breeches. Whatever, soldier, you prefer; only cease your teasing, I beg you. I'm as hard as a broom handle, and aching for a spend" (Waters 197).

At this stage of her life, she is in command of her own destiny, and she exerts agency in a similar fashion to women prostitutes, who represented a threat to Victorian notions of morality and purity connected with the feminine ideal. As such, they were invading the public sphere reserved for men and exchanging sex in return for money (Nead 106). Nan even makes fun of men's sexual gratification, showing that she does not feel aroused by male desire, ridiculing men's penises and telling her clients what they want to hear. Again, gender performance is taken to its limits and her drag acting is so good that her real sex is not betrayed at any time. Therefore, "sexual desire can be manipulated by the act of cross-dressing" and biological sex is hidden by a gendered style of dress that does not correspond with society's expectations (Neal 65).

Carriages were another scenario for both male and female prostitution, and this is the way in which Nan meets Diana Lethaby for the first time. At this stage of her lesbian existence all aspects of her identity beyond sexuality are denied (Wilson 300). In my opinion, what Waters pretends to show here is that the possibility of the objectification and commodification of the female body can be also present in a lesbian relationship. We could even go further and talk about fetishism and lack

³ For a further discussion on prostitution and its regulation through the Contagious Diseases Acts, see M.I. Romeo Ruiz, "The plots of History and the Rape of the Speculum: The Contagious Diseases Acts and the violation of women's rights." *Historia y Representación en la Cultura Global*. Eds. Carla Rodríguez González and Rubén Valdés Mirayes, Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2008, 103-110. Print.



of sexual agency; Diana calls Nan *my tart*, a Victorian word for prostitute. As I have stated before, prostitution means the exchange of sex for money, and, in this sense, Nan becomes a commodity at the service of Diana's wishes. According to Debra Curtis, "sexuality is produced and mediated by culturally specific historical and social processes" (95). She also states that sexual subjectivity is a process that is always on the make, which is never finished and complete, and this is what Waters wants to emphasize in the case of her lesbian characters. With Diana, Nan learns that there are other forms of lesbian desire and that there is a class hierarchy in the Victorian world of lesbians. Diana and her friends belong to a "Sapphic circle," but Nan does not become a member of that group, so her sense of otherness is intensified.⁴ Nan's desire to be admired and to arouse erotic enjoyment in her audience with her performances becomes destructive and dangerous, and connects with contemporary issues of eroticization and consent and the imbalance of power in certain lesbian relationships. Nan becomes the victim of objectification and fetishization, blurring the line between pleasure and sexual exploitation, without any possibility of exerting agency (Koolen 383-384).

Fetishism, based on the assumption that there are "natural" and "unnatural forms" of sexual desire is present in the relation between Diana and Nan, implying that there are legitimate and illegitimate objects of sexual gratification (Curtis 107). The presence of *Monsieur Dildo* in their sexual encounters which Nan describes as "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." This demonstrates that there are other ways of living the lesbian experience that are not linked with love and respect for the other (Waters 241). Nan is commodified as she continues being a sex-worker because Diana obtains her theatrical and sexual services in return for material and erotic pleasures. Waters describes the sexual scenes between them with a boldness that implies that corruption and immorality are more evident in the upper-classes than in the working-class world of the music-hall; but Nan becomes dependant on Diana's sexual practices and even on hashish, which helps her to accept that she has transformed herself into a kept mistress captive in Diana's universe (Koolen 387). With her, she uses lewd words she had never pronounced before which shocked her. She also discovers that in the rosewood trunk in Diana's bedroom there are other things

⁴ Lesbian women were also called *sapphists* in the nineteenth century. Sappho was an ancient Greek poet who was born on the island of Lesbos. Sappho's poetry centres on passion and love for various personages and both genders. The word *lesbian* derives from the name of the island of her birth, Lesbos, while her name is also the origin of the word *sapphic*; neither word was applied to female homosexuality until the nineteenth century. The narrators of many of her poems speak of infatuations and love (sometimes requited, sometimes not) for various females, but descriptions of physical acts between women are few and subject to debate. Whether these poems are meant to be autobiographical is not known, although elements of other parts of Sappho's life do make appearances in her work, and it would be compatible with her style to have these intimate encounters expressed poetically, as well. Her homoeroticism should be placed in the context of the seventh century before Christ.



related to lesbian sexual practices whose existence she ignored. She finds “a collection of erotic pamphlets and novels” which proves the existence of erotic, medical and literary discourses on lesbian sexuality in the Victorian period (Palmer 73). In fact, doctors and scientists began to approach the issue of women’s same-sex desire in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and defined female homosexuality as a sexual perversion or inversion; in this sense, the work of sexologists like Havelock Ellis or Richard von Krafft-Ebing was determining.

With all this, the novel pretends to demonstrate that the idealization of queer environments where there is a sense of acceptance and belonging because they defy homophobic mainstream attitudes is misleading and that exploitation and oppression can be present in these apparently tolerant spaces (Koolen 388). In fact, Nan rebels against Diana’s sexual and class power exerting agency with her for the first time when she protects the slum girl servant Zena from the upper-class Sapphic circle’s gaze and objectification. At the same time, certain beliefs held by the upper-classes in relation to working-class sexuality are made evident, which identified poor people as *the other*, this time concerning lower-class lesbian sexuality- it was thought that poor girls had bigger clitorises similar to a penis because of constant rubbing with other girls in over-crowded dwellings or places of confinement like prisons, workhouses or asylums; similar ideas circulated about black women. Here, we are witnesses to another crucial transition in the formation of Nan’s lesbian identity.

Nan develops her lesbian identity fully when she has a mature relation with Florence Banner, who is a socialist and a philanthropist that devotes her time and energy to help the people in the East End of London. Following Caroline Gonda, we move towards a lesbian theory through reflecting on personal lived experience (113). In this sense, the idea of community has a fundamental role to reach personal liberation and social progress through sexual liberation: Nan and Flo establish a lesbian relationship based on equal and open terms through which they gain agency (Kohlke 9). Nan feels for the first time that she is accepted by her peer group of toms. For this, the episode in the *Boy in the Boat* club represents a crucial moment, showing her that the lesbian gaze can also be desiring and respectful, especially in toms’ working-class communities, where lesbians are not only looked at, but can also return the gaze. In this sense, exploitation and objectification disappear.

The differences between working-class lesbian communities and upper-class Sapphic circles show that there is not just one community but that there are other ways of living the lesbian experience in egalitarian and mutual environments without the competition and hierarchy of the upper-classes (Koolen 390-391). Therefore, Waters tries to avoid relegating lesbianism to an arena outside the dominant culture, and acknowledges differences between lesbians, mainly associated with class. Nan wants to be a tom and asserts her own identity. The idea of a lesbian collectivity is not adopted in a simple or unquestionable form, but it is affirmed (Jeremiah 138-139). In this respect, and according to Judith Butler’s performative view of gender, “it is variation on repetition that constitutes agency,” and agency is always relational, hence the importance of community (Jeremiah 131). As a consequence, Nan can behave and dress like a lesbian when she is with Florence and is accepted by their community based on mutual assistance and respect for diversity and what she calls



“my people.” Nonetheless, she cannot repudiate her past experiences as part of her present persona, and those will continue to determine her future identity.

Because, in my opinion, this novel is also about finding new ways of expressing lesbian love and desire far away from the imitation of binary heterosexual stereotypes which identify sexual partners with the dichotomy subject-object that has pervaded same-sex relationships. Traditionally, desire has been defined in terms of absence or lack of the desired object by the subject in lesbian, feminist and gay studies, following Plato, Hegel Freud and Lacan; according to this tendency, “desire, like female sexuality itself, is insatiable, boundless, relentless, a gaping hole that cannot be filled or can only temporarily be filled; it suffers an inherently dependence on the object(s), a fundamental incompleteness without them” (Grosz 71). But desire has very much to do with the sexual object choice; a lesbian’s primary love interest is a woman, regardless of whether that inclination is eroticized physically. Desire is an act of yearning, of emotional and intellectual movement, of becoming, all of which are realistic elements of lesbian interaction (Engelbrecht 91-92). This is what we find in the relationship between Nan and Flo:

I stood before her, holding the steaming mugs. She had taken the towel from her head, and her hair was spread out over a bit of lace on the back of her chair, like the halo on a Flemish Madonna. I did not think that I had ever seen her hair so loose and full before [...] I looked from her hair to her face—to her lashes, to her wide pink mouth, to the line of her jaw, and the subtle weight of flesh beneath it. I looked at her hands [...] I looked at her throat. It was smooth and very white; beneath it—just visible in the spreading V at the neck of her dressing-gown—was the hint of the beginnings of a swell of a breast. (Waters 402-403)

Desire is a notion that has traditionally been understood in male and heteronormative terms, but it should also accommodate women’s and lesbian desire. What I propose, following Elizabeth Grosz’s ideas, is that desire should be considered as “an intensity, innervation, positivity or force” and understood in terms of “surfaces and interstices.” This notion follows Nietzsche, Spinoza and Deleuze in seeing desire as something primary which creates things, produces alliances and promotes interaction between things and people (Grosz 74-75). In this sense, a woman’s desire for another woman finds the drive of nature and primitiveness in Nan’s thoughts when she is contemplating the object of her love, “all the time averting my gaze from the white V of curving flesh beneath her throat, because I knew that, if I looked at it again, I would be compelled to step to her and kiss it” (Waters 403). Grosz states that there are certain elements of lesbian theory that should be omitted such as sentimentality and romanticism in lesbian relationships, heteronormative models in terms of binary or polarized models, models that give priority to genitality, and patriarchal concepts of what is moral, fair, radical or transgressive. We need to look at lesbian relations and, if possible, at all social relations in terms of “bodies, energies, movements and inscriptions” rather than in terms of “ideologies, the inculcation of ideas, the transmission of systems of belief and representation” (Grosz 77).



Through sexual encounters, lesbian bodies' surfaces are inscribed with desire, a libido which is not innate or given, but productive though not reproductive. In the same fashion, Waters's celebration of lesbian love at the end of *Tipping the Velvet* makes it different from the love which is reduced to a commodity. It is freed from social constraints as the protagonists live in a social space very different from their original backgrounds. Waters explores "the possibilities of self-development offered by love relations both in the Victorian and, by implication, in the present world" and "the transgressive quality of same-sex love makes this exploration more meaningful" (Costantini 34). Lesbian sex and eroticism is explored throughout the novel which becomes in a way a kind of lesbian manifesto.

As a way of conclusion, the analysis of this Neo-Victorian representation of deviant sexuality—lesbianism—which can be found in the novel object of discussion allows us to elucidate the Neo-Victorian project of giving power and voice to those who had been victims of sexual exploitation and violence. At the same time, the reflection in the story of the Butlerian approach to the notion of performativity echoes an outstanding feature of historical recreations of the Victorian past as a mirror in which we can see contemporary anxieties. Sarah Waters engages in an analysis of lesbianism which succeeds in giving agency to women, but simultaneously depicts a homosexual community where prostitution, racial and social discrimination, and sexual exploitation and commodification are painfully present in all discourses and walks of life. Fetishization and masochism form part of Sapphic practices despite Waters's attempts to build a positive construction of the lesbian identity, but violence is a common feature of present and past civilizations. Waters makes a joke on male desires and male sexual behaviour regarding prostitution with her lesbian protagonist assuming a gender identity that allows her to work as a renter in the Victorian metropolis. This gives her power and agency for a time, but victimisation appears soon in the horizon when she returns to the lesbian community and becomes the sexual slave of another woman. However, female sexual desire can be inscribed on bodily surfaces although it seems that the postfeminist belief in female agency and empowerment is a fallacy to a certain extent, as gender oppression and sexual violence at the service of systems of power that discriminate those who are most vulnerable still coexist with evolution and social progress.

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