

‘It seemed to be my fate to be dressed and fashioned and admired by others. I didn’t mind it.’ (*Tipping the Velvet*, p.270) Discuss the different ways in which bodies are variously displayed, exhibited, performed, or rendered deviant in Neo-Victorian texts.

The neo-Victorian genre often deals with the presentation and liberation of marginalised figures from the Victorian period. Particularly when it comes to the portrayal of female or disabled figures, these bodies are often rendered deviant, regarded as either hypersexualised or sinful. The contemporary’s fascination with the life of Joseph Merrick is demonstrated by the sheer number of adaptations that have been made about his life, with Sherman’s *Words for Elephant Man* ranking among them. Through this direct engagement with the past and how Merrick was treated by both the medical world of science and by the general public in freak shows, Sherman demonstrates how the disabled body of the Victorian period was always in a state of performance. In a similar vein, both *Tipping the Velvet* (hereafter *Tipping*) and ‘The Steam Dancer’ are texts that follow the lives of two female performers and therefore, like Sherman’s poems, contribute to the narrative of sexualised and deviant bodies being spectacles for the public gaze.

Many neo-Victorian texts preoccupy themselves with ‘providing a voice’ for those who were not granted one during their own lifetime. Arguably, Sherman, in *Words for Elephant Man*, grants a voice for disabled members of Victorian society through distinguishing the Elephant Man, the performer and Victorian ‘celebrity’, from Joseph Merrick, the man. Through the elephant man (and not Merrick) featuring in the title of the collection, it suggests that Sherman is not simply writing on behalf of Merrick, but rather for everyone who was labelled a ‘freak’ in Victorian society. This is most evident in his poem ‘Freaks’ where Sherman links Merrick’s experience to that of the sex workers of Whitechapel and the victims of Jack the

Ripper.¹ The work of a freak show performer was often compared to that of prostitution through its street display of sexualised and often working-class bodies. This is based on the Victorian ideology that deviant sexuality could be conflated with physical or moral ‘monstrosity.’ Rather than degrading the work of these performers, Sherman’s poetry instead critiques the showman who ‘sells’ disabled bodies for entertainment and also the audience, who happily pays to see them. Regarding this, Helen Davies has argued that ‘The audience’s apparel codes them as sophisticated and respectable, but also speaks of a middle-class prurient interest in disfigured bodies, whether due to a medical condition as in the case of Merrick or due to brutal murder as in the case of the Ripper’s victims.’² In challenging the moral compass of these people who profit or delight in watching suffering, Sherman thus sheds light on the hypocrisy of the Victorian attitude towards disabled bodies.

That the poem mentions the women murdered by Jack the Ripper is important because ‘it reminds us that, despite the dangers, women are still working the streets. It also demonstrates that this idea of ‘selling’ does not stop with death - since their victimisation continues with ‘posthumous objectification and exhibition’.’³ This is key to the wider neo-Victorian discussion because it highlights how the deaths of these women have been used as voyeuristic entertainment for decades, such as in the re-enactment of their deaths for attractions like *Madame Tussauds*. There have been numerous attempts at providing Ripper’s victims with a voice including *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* written by Hallie Rubenhold. This book, in a very similar way to Sherman’s *Words for Elephant Man* revisits Victorian history to provide a more respectful account of the women’s lives beyond

¹ Kenneth Sherman, *Words for Elephant Man* (Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1983).

All subsequent references to this text are given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

² Helen Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.160.

³ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, p.160.

that of their victimisation and brutal deaths.⁴ Merrick, like these women, is forced to sell his body for consumer gratification and so Sherman's poems, written in the voice of Joseph Merrick, remind us of the real man.

Sherman's collection presents Merrick in a positive light through he is shown to have agency in his decision to work in freak shows. Sherman's 'The Writer' replicates this, even using form to present the poem in the shape of a letter where Merrick asks his future manager, Tom Norman, for employment. In real life, Norman went on to exhibit Merrick in a shop in Whitechapel under his show name, 'The Elephant Man'. While Merrick has often been presented a victim in many adaptations of his life, this poem shows him taking destiny into his own hands. We can see this through how he refers to the well-known biblical teaching, 'God helps those who help themselves' (l.3). He does not complete the phrase, however, which relies on the reader to make the connection. Sherman too reinserts Merrick's autonomy through how he claims his alias 'The Elephant Man' when signing off the letter, rather than it being a name he was forced to accept.

Living both within the past and the present, there is a multiplicity to Merrick's existence. In addition to existing both in the past and our contemporary, he is also Merrick and Elephant Man, man and beast and even victim and villain. The Victorians had held the belief that those who are beautiful must be morally good, for sin could be seen on a person's outward appearance. That he looked monstrous must mean his behaviour and personality reflect this. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Merrick has often been suspected of being Jack the Ripper, the most famous villain of the Victorian era, which is shown through Sherman's

⁴ Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).

reference to Ripper's victims in 'Freaks'. The same notion is adopted in another of the poems from his collection, entitled 'The Show, in England, is Closed' where Merrick is compared to Mr Hyde from Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novella, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.⁵ Here, spoken through the voice of Merrick, Sherman labels the Elephant Man 'the age's/ Doppelganger/ its underside/ its Hyde' (ll.16-19). This is interesting for two reasons. The first is that Hyde, in Stevenson's text, epitomises sin and embodies the persona of a lower-class man; and thus, is reminiscent of Merrick's working-class origins. The second is that like Dr Jekyll, Merrick also has two identities: Joseph and The Elephant Man. Rather than finding these associations isolating, Sherman makes Merrick's 'othering' seem empowering 'because I [he] was the real thing/ no phony cannibal' (ll.10-11). Distinguishing himself from the other performers, he embraces being the show's star attraction.

Having swapped one voyeuristic environment for another, Merrick soon becomes a medical marvel test subject for Dr Treves and his peers at the London hospital. Reiger has coined the term 'medical sensationalism'⁶ which offers a critique of exploitative medical professionals who had a desire to 'correct' unusual bodies, rather than study them objectively. This is replicated in Treves' actual memoirs of Merrick: 'at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this love figure displayed. He was naked to the waist, his feet were bare.'⁷ His use of vocabulary is suggestive and often intimates sexual as well as a physical aberration. Through both his gentle nature and his occupation as a freak show performer, Merrick is frequently rendered the fallen woman figure. In Treves' accounts, the doctor writes that the beauty of his hand 'which any woman might have envied' and

⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, ed. By Martin A. Danahay (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2005).

⁶ Christy Reiger, 'The Legacy of Medical Sensationalism in 'The Crimson Petal and the White' and 'The Dress Lodger'', in (eds.) Nadine Boem-Schnikter and Susanne Gruss, *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp.153-64.

⁷ Frederick Treves, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (London: Bibliotech Press, 2018), p.3.

describes Merrick's nature as 'gentle' and 'affectionate'.⁸ In Lynch's film adaptation, upon meeting Merrick for the first time, Treves takes off Merrick's garment before he even consents to him doing so, which demonstrates both an abuse of power as well as seduction, since the veil is an article of clothing often associated with a woman's modesty.⁹

Sherman's 'Before the Pathological Society of London' responds to this period in Merrick's life, which saw him treated simultaneously as a freak and scientific marvel. Interestingly, the medical students are described as 'a row of ventriloquists' puppets' (l.13) which, similar to in 'Freaks', puts Merrick in the position of power within the poem. The allusion to ventriloquism is also a trope notoriously adopted by the writers of the neo-Victorian genre, as we shall see later with Waters' novel. By the end of the poem Merrick still has the upper hand over the medical professionals since, to them, he remains 'a curdled question mark/that breathes?' (l.27). More explicitly, Sherman's anthology includes a collection of drawings and measurements that are used to demonstrate what Merrick looked like when he was alive. The final piece in the collection 'From the...' provides a description of Merrick's skeleton from a catalogue of the museum in the London hospital, noting the precise numerical values of his skull. In a similar vein, 'Treves' Description of Merrick' is a poem which refers to Treves' medical notes about Merrick. In this poem Treves offers a ridiculing description of Merrick, comparing his head to a 'brown cauliflower' (l.11) and his thumb like a 'radish' (l.49). While Merrick, through Sherman, enters into a dialogue with Treves in this poem, it could still be considered unethical to use the life of a real man in neo-Victorian adaptations.

⁸ Treves, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, p.17.

⁹ *The Elephant Man*, dir. By David Lynch (Brookfilms, 1980).

Since the neo-Victorian can only offer ‘distorted images of the Victorian past,’¹⁰ can it ever be right to use the life story of a man that lived, even if the intention is well-meaning? Probably the most apparent example of this is through adaptations have chosen to display Merrick’s death. For example, in Lynch’s film, Merrick is supposed to have committed suicide by removing the pillows from his bed that keep his neck upright.¹¹ Meanwhile, in ‘Ripper Street’, he is murdered using the same technique.¹² While the audience may be aware of these nuances, if a viewer were to take the intertext at face value, their interpretation of the real Merrick might be altered. As Mark Llewellyn writes, ‘like the biographer as grave robber, some neo-Victorian fiction is in danger of blurring the distinction between reality and imagination, lives lived and created.’¹³ The fact that Merrick in both screen adaptations is played by able-bodied actors further forces us to question whether contemporary reworkings of his life do aim to increase the representation of disabled voices, or whether they are just another form of voyeurism. This can also be said for Sherman’s collection. Since Merrick’s body is once again put on display through these poems, the contemporary reader is still encouraged to partake in a voyeuristic gaze through revisiting these figures’ lives in our present day.

‘The Steam Dancer’ is a text which concerns itself with providing a narrative voice for the female disabled body. Missouri is a woman-machine hybrid, having been fitted with a prosthetic leg, arm and eye after the mechanic finds her close to death. The protagonist rather

¹⁰ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, p.1.

¹¹ *The Elephant Man*, dir. By David Lynch (Brooksfilms, 1980).

¹² *Ripper Street*, dir. By Tom Shankland (Lookout Point Ltd and BBC America, 2013).

¹³ Mark Llewellyn, ‘Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation’, in *Engaging the Victorians*, special issue of *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, ed. By Rebecca Munford and Paul Young, 20:1-2 (2009), (pp.27-44), p.38.

than seeing ‘the parts she wasn’t born with’.¹⁴ as debilitating, she feels empowered by how they make her different from other women. Near the beginning she narrates, ‘Other women are only whole, she thinks. Other women are only born, not made. I have been crafted.’ She notes how the ‘interplay and synthesis of her body and the mechanic’s handiwork’, the ‘steel toe to flesh-and-bone heel’ and the ‘nickel fingers across sweaty belly and thighs’ are what make her that special compared to those who are wholly flesh and bone (p.70). Her mechanical components are also what elevate her dance performances. She proudly recalls that the piano player had once said, ‘You’d think she emerged outta her momma’s womb like that’ (p.70) which confirms the naturalness to which she embraces her mechanical parts.

In spite of this, her mechanical body parts are as prone to damage as the ‘human’ parts of her body. After dancing at Madam Ling’s establishment, she burns her knee from a leak in the valve in her prosthetic leg. Noting the similarities between flesh and machine, she recites, ‘*Ain’t nothing yet conjured by God nor man won’t go and turn against you, sooner or later*’ (p.72) She refuses to dwell on the past, quoting the proverb from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, ‘*What’s past is prologue*’ (p.76). This quote acts as both a reminder of the text’s neo-Victorian genre and as a moral for the story: that the past is already written, but the future is still up for us to decide through the choices we make.

Davies understands the act of ‘re-membering’ in the neo-Victorian genre to be intrinsically linked to the sexualised body. She contends that since ‘member’ refers to ‘the male genitalia’ and even sometimes female genitalia, it is significant that there is a ‘recurring emphasis on gender and sexuality in neo-Victorian literature.’¹⁵ In the case of the feminine, disabled and

¹⁴ Caitlin R. Kiernan, ‘The Steam Dancer’ (1896), *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*, ed. By Ann and Jeff Vandermeer (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2010), p.68. All subsequent references to this text are given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

¹⁵ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, p.8.

queer subject, much emphasis is focused on their bodies and sexualities and how these pose a challenge to ‘patriarchal, heteronormative versions of history.’¹⁶ Through how the disabled body is fetishised, Elizabeth Grosz notes that ‘[...] the initial reaction to the freakish and the monstrous is a perverse kind of sexual curiosity. People think to themselves: ‘How do they do it? What kind of sex lives are available to siamese twins, hermaphrodites, bearded ladies, and midgets? There is a certain morbid speculation about what it would be like to be with such persons, or worse, to be them.’¹⁷ This is exactly what we get in ‘The Steam Dancer’ through Missouri and the mechanic’s sexual encounter where the removal of her limbs affords the reader a voyeuristic gaze of the disabled feminine body. During this encounter, the Mechanic utters that he ‘made a small window in your skull, only just large enough that I can see inside. So, no more secrets’ (p.74). The mechanic’s fetishisation of Missouri’s body is embedded in his desire for control over her. This begins first by altering her body, then it progresses to him monitoring her thoughts.

It is impossible to read this text without noting its similarities with Donna Haraway’s famous work, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto.’ This explores contemporary feminism and the doing away of boundaries between human, animal and machine through addressing ‘permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.’¹⁸ Through adopting the steampunk and neo-Victorian genres, Kiernan engages in contemporary feminist and disability debate surrounding the hybrid body. Missouri Banks poses an example of what Elizabeth Ho has called the ‘postcolonial cyborg body’¹⁹ who has entered a ‘third space.’²⁰ That is, the space

¹⁶ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, p.8-9.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. By Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), p.64.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p.154.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.168.

²⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

between two poles or binarities which, in 'The Steam Dancer', is in the conflation with gender and disability. The text is also referring to the postcolonial hybrid woman. Textual details like the mechanic's 'cup of strong black Indian tea' (p.71), references to the Opium War (p.69) and Madam Ling's clientele (p.70) are all reminders of the West's colonial legacy. Arguably, the neo-Victorian text is even a hybrid in itself, entering a third space that is not wholly contemporary, but not belonging to the past either.

'Gender is about race is about class is about sexuality is about age is about nationality is about an entire range of social relations.'²¹ In many ways 'The Steam Dancer' and *Tipping* overlap through their address of third-wave feminism and intersectionality, terms first coined in the late 1980s. There is a duplicity in their protagonists' identities which firmly places these texts within this intersection of social and political disparities. For instance, Missouri in 'The Steam Dancer' is both a woman and is disabled; meanwhile, *Tipping*'s protagonist, Nancy, is both woman and lesbian. In much the same way that Merrick's humanity is called into question through his bodily disfigurements, the gendered body is often used to measure the humanity of a subject. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."²² She argues that gender is not a free choice, it presupposes each person and so, in that sense, it is 'an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene.'²³ As Sara Salih explains, "whereas performance presupposes a pre-existing subject, performativity contests

²¹ Kate Weston, 'Me, Myself, and I', in *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*, ed. By Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines and Mark E. Casey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.15.

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp.43-44.

²³ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988), pp. 519-531(p.526) in *JSTOR* <www.jstor.org/stable/3207893> [Accessed 2 January 2020].

the very notion of the subject" and, rather, is what leads to the illusion of "a natural sort of being."²⁴

Often this performance feels oppressive, since it involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits. Despite repeated attempts at trying to reinvent her identity, Nancy is unable to entirely shed her past identity. When Kitty addresses her as 'Nan' at the end of the novel, she responds that "'Nan" "ain't my name, and never was'".²⁵ In the same way that gender is performative, Nancy's life on the stage is now a part of her identity and will continue to inform her future self.²⁶ The conflict surrounding repetition and copies are integral to debates surrounding the authenticity of the neo-Victorian genre. That these texts are set in the past is also significant when considering performativity's concerns with historical repetitions, especially during an era which saw the origins of Western feminism and a breaking away from society induced gender roles.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "one is not born, but rather *becomes*, a woman"²⁷ is also fundamental in addressing the performative nature of gender. By the end of the novel, Nancy creates her own identity through her dress, which is simultaneously both masculine and feminine. As Butler writes, Waters has shown that 'masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one' and 'feminine a male body as easily as a female one.'²⁸ In the novel this is echoed through Nancy finding liberation in her ability to switch between

²⁴ Sara Salih, 'On Judith Butler and Performativity', in *Sexualities & Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, ed. by Karen Lovaas and Mercilee Jenkins (New York: Sage Publications, 2007), pp.55-58 (p.57).

²⁵ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 1999), p.462. All subsequent references to this text are given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

²⁶ Mandy Koolen, 'Historical Fiction and the Revaluating of Historical Continuity in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*', *Contemporary Literature* 51 (2010), pp.371-397, in *Muse* <<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/403359>> [Accessed 2 January 2020].

²⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p.301.

²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p.9.

genders. Notably, when Nancy sees the room advertisement on Green Street, she affirms that 'there was something very appealing about that Fe-Male. I saw myself in it - in the hyphen' (p.211). Another instance of this is when she and Florence go to Boy in the Boat and Nancy begins to question why the other women are giving her stares. She puts it down to breaching 'some tommish etiquette, coming here in short hair and a skirt' (p.418). In particular, the moments where Nancy cuts her hair are always followed by a significant moment of change in her life, for example when she enters the music hall as a performer. As Neal affirms, 'by eroticising short hair and combining the idea of gender freedom with sexual liberty in the hair cut.'²⁹ Thus, Nancy's refusal to choose a fixed identity reminds the reader that the body is a set of possibilities which only gains meaning through a 'historically mediated expression in the world.'³⁰

A major area of debate surrounding *Tipping*, which is not covered in either of the two other texts, is of the lesbian and butch body. The most pertinent example of this in the book is when Nancy puts on the velvet suit Walter gave her. There is something he does not like about her appearance that he cannot put his finger on: 'It's a perfect fit...The colour is good. And yet there's something - *unpleasing* - about it.' (p.118) Following this, Mrs Dendy replies that it is because she is 'Too real. She looks like a boy' (p.118). Rather than looking like a girl dressed up as a boy, Nancy's realistic portrayal of a boy turns playful tongue-in-cheek into something that is potentially threatening. Ironically, Walter tries to make her look less like a boy to make their act work, by putting Nan King in 'cleverly tailored suits that masked the slender angularity of my [her] frame with girlish curves' (p.126). The fact that Walter, the

²⁹ Neal, '(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and Tipping the Velvet', p.63.

³⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. By Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p.902.

only male figure in this scene, has the deciding vote over what Nancy wears is significant in how Waters is commenting on the societal methods of keeping gender norms regulated.³¹

While a fictional text, Waters did base the story in part on the life of Vesta Tilley, a cross-dressing performer from the Victorian period. As in Sherman's collection, there is also the issue of presenting real bodies and inserting them into a contemporary political discussion without their consent. Concerned that she could only speak on behalf of another person, in an interview for *Time Out*, Waters remarks that "I've got a slight anxiety that all I can do as a writer is ventriloquize, that I haven't got a voice of my own."³² While Nancy and Kitty's act has been based off the performances of Vesta Tilley, it is interesting that Neal notes "Tilley, unlike Nan, keeps just enough simulation of "femininity" in her portrayal to mitigate her outward "masculinity" and therefore avoid any possible (homo)sexual scandal."³³ Nancy, meanwhile, in appearing 'too masculine', has the potential to fool and deceive those around her.

Sheila Jeffreys, however, has been a vocal critic of transvestism, maintaining that the lesbian who chooses to wear 'male' clothing is betraying her gender in wanting to be a man.³⁴

Jeffreys argues that butch aesthetics are a 'damaging effect of the promotion of role-playing' in lesbian culture, adhering to heterosexual conventions whereby 'the butch partner assumes an active and masculine role similar to the conventions associated with heterosexual men'.³⁵

Waters rejects Jeffrey's view through empowering the butch body, drawing on Butler's view that 'within lesbian contexts, the "identification" with masculinity that appears as butch

³¹ Claire O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p.26.

³² John O'Connell, 'The Tipping Point', in *Time Out* (2006), p.18.

³³ Neal, '(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and Tipping the Velvet', p.64.

³⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

³⁵ Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective*, pp.126-7.

identity is not a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality.’³⁶ The BBC adaptation of *Tipping* did receive backlash for how it seemed to appeal to a mainstream heterosexual audience. Waters herself was disappointed by the adaptation’s lack of lesbian representation, noting that Rachel Stirling’s Nancy Astley ‘was not really the Nancy I had imagined [;] I had always thought of Nancy as...more butch.’³⁷ That the lesbian body is only accepted by a mass audience if it is effeminate reminds us of the ‘apparitional’ lesbian who is too often forced to occupy what Castle calls ‘a recessive, indeterminate, misted-over space’³⁸.

Waters’ novel is undeniably an attempt at rewriting the lesbian narrative back into Victorian history. In an interview with the Guardian she also dismissed the notion that she is a "Dickensian" writer, arguing that unlike Dickens, she is not writing about society now.³⁹ As a result, *Tipping* is a picaresque novel that is hyper-aware of its metafictional elements. Its structure, for instance, reflects the different phases of Nancy’s cross-dressing acts. The first phase being Nancy’s life working in the music halls, as well as her experiences as a renter boy on the streets of London. The second phase is as Diana’s sexual prisoner and the third phase is where Nancy finds a sense of belonging and embraces her identity as a transvestite.⁴⁰ In many ways this structure is reminiscent of the three acts one might expect from a performance, thus further feeding into Butler’s ideas surrounding performativity in gender. Waters even adopts the language of the neo-Victorian, whereby Nancy remarks, ‘she

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p.156.

³⁷ Sarah Waters, ‘Desire, Betrayal and “Lesbo Victorian Romps”’, *Sarah Waters, Q&A* (2002), in *The Guardian*, <www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/nov/05/fiction> [accessed 20 December 2019].

³⁸ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.31.

³⁹ Sarah Waters, ‘Hot Waters’, in *The Guardian* (2002) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/26/artsfeatures.bookerprize2002>> [accessed 28 December 2019]

⁴⁰ Allison Neal, ‘(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and Tipping the Velvet’, in *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4:1 (2011), pp.55-76 (p.57).

took me for some insolent *voyeur*! The thought gave me an odd mixture of shame and embarrassment and also, I must confess, pleasure' (p.221).

In engaging with the Victorian past, Waters similarly writes *Tipping* in response to Oscar Wilde's famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and to the silencing of same-sex desire throughout patriarchal history: 'A lot of work has been done on Oscar Wilde and his milieu [...] I wanted to steal it for a lesbian agenda.'⁴¹ While there are historical records which show the existence of gay men in the Victorian era, namely because homosexuality was illegal and so there are recorded cases of men being arrested for it, 'women were under the radar a little.'⁴² The desires of women were not something Victorian society much cared for, heterosexual or homosexual, so it comes as no surprise that lesbian stories have been overlooked within the period. Rather than being considered criminal or a threat to the nuclear family like their male counterparts, lesbians from the period largely went undetected and so it stands to reason that Victorian fiction rarely addresses feminine same-sex desire.

Indeed, Waters presents this link to Wilde's novel by comparing Nancy's time as a renter boy to the homosocial world Dorian Gray is introduced to through Henry Wotton. This is ironic since Nancy dresses up as a boy to escape the advances of heterosexual men and instead finds herself being propositioned by homosexual men. In addition to adding humour to the text, this element also emphasises the performativity of gender and sexuality since Nancy can navigate through both spaces. Waters also seems to be talking back to *Dorian Gray* through how Nancy's phase of becoming Diana's 'tart' (p.248) compares to Dorian and his friendship with Wotton. Nancy is objectified by Diana and her friends, who are only interested in her

⁴¹ Sarah Waters, 'The BBC make it sound quite filthy', ed. By Will Cohe, in *The Telegraph* (2002), p.23. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4728952/The-BBC-make-it-sound-quite-filthy.html>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

⁴² Rosie Millard, 'I'm going to give the lesbians a little rest', *The Sunday Times* (2008), p.5.

ability to stimulate their own sexual fantasies. After talking in front of Diana's friends, Mrs. Maria Jex retorts, "But it speaks! (p.273). 'It' is a particularly dehumanising term that emphasizes the class inequalities that have enabled them to buy and treat people like animals for the sole purpose of their entertainment.

What this essay has shown is that there are many ethical concerns regarding the presentation of 'othered', 'unusual' and 'orientalised' bodies in the neo-Victorian genre. Authors like Kiernan and Waters have succeeded in providing readers, who might otherwise feel disengaged by historical narratives, interact with the past. This is through how they have been able to situate Victorian themes within contemporary modes and debates. Sherman's attempt at rewriting Joseph Merrick as neither villain nor victim has also been relatively successful in providing Merrick with an autonomous voice that recent adaptations have not traditionally granted him. There still remains the issue, however, surrounding the ethics of appropriating real lives. Christian Gutleben has fought against this idea in what he terms 'the tyranny of the politically correct.'⁴³ That the neo-Victorian genre feels a moral responsibility to address the silencing of marginalised members of Victorian society has made the genre cliché and lacking originality. Yet, 'this lack of originality' Gutleben speaks of fades to nothing when compared to the lack of diversity seen in conventional historical narratives. That these texts engage with the '*(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*'⁴⁴ means neo-Victorianism partakes in much more than a box-ticking exercise. Through presenting characters whose narratives are often omitted from traditional Victorian texts, readers are able to gain a much fuller appreciation and understanding of the period's history.

⁴³Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p.169.

⁴⁴ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.4.

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