

## Adapting the Music Hall Novel

This paper will investigate Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) as an adaptation of the music hall novels *Dorothy Wallis* (Walter Besant, 1892) and *The Christians* (1897). Waters' novel draws on Victorian fears of corrupted female sexuality to historicise lesbian identity, using the music halls as a place where a young woman may not only earn a living but explore her sexual identity. Despite the primary character's sexuality, and that of those around her, seemingly making Waters' novel a revision of these nineteenth century texts, the necessary removal of Nan from the theatre and indeed all performance is a tacit acknowledgement that a woman's performance must be appropriately directed, in Nan's case towards the suffragette campaign.

Victorian theatre (rather than music hall and other variety theatrical performances) became more respectable towards the end of the century following the relaxation of licensing and several marriages between actresses and peers, leading to an improved status of the actress alongside the improved status of the theatre itself as a desirable, fashionable middle and upper class pastime. This paper also examines the difference in music hall's association with working class actresses, as the improved respectability of theatre meant middle-class women found acting a way to earn a living and raise their social status through acceptance into society and, potentially, marriage. Working class women, however, such as those featured in these three texts, were able to earn a respectable living in other occupations and theatre was closed to them, so music hall retained its morally dubious, even corrupting, reputation.

Nineteenth century novels present music hall actresses as a cautionary tale. *Dorothy Wallis* reads as a "revelation of the mean and sordid side of theatrical life" (New York Times review, September 18th 1892) while *The Christian* (Hall Caine, 1897) is a severe warning to those considering taking up an acting career. Portraying music hall as an insidious force of moral corruption, they exhort men to take up the role of moral guardian from the middle class female reformers that Waters focuses on in *Tipping the Velvet*. This is a part of the class debate of these novels, encouraging the restriction of working-class women to the music hall where they are unable to better themselves as middle-class women are in the theatre.