



SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITIES IN VICTORIAN QUEER CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the symbolic construction of queer identities in Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Trilogy using content analysis and film semiotics. It explores postmodern narrative techniques and the symbolism of femininity, focusing on themes of desire, identity, and redemption. The highlight of this article is how Waters' works enrich the narrative and challenge traditional representations, offering new perspectives on gender and sexuality in visual culture, and provide a framework for symbolic of queer film, contributed three themes: sex, salvation and desire. Furthermore, the finding also indicates that the shift of queer films to OTT platforms has diversified queer imagery, encouraging more creators to engage in queer film production and fostering a pluralistic understanding and support for the LGBTQ+ community.

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1. Introduction

Sarah Waters, a contemporary British author, is renowned for her layered depictions of the Victorian era, which grapple with complex gender identities and the then-taboo of homosexuality (Dove, 2019; Suwa, 2019). Her dual identity as a lesbian woman lends her narratives an authentic voice, delving into the nuanced experiences of gender and sexual minorities with introspection. Her Neo-Victorian Trilogy—comprising *Tipping the Velvet* (2002), *Affinity* (2008), and *Fingersmith* (2005)—extends beyond literature, being vividly adapted into film and television, thus enriching Victorian depictions of women's agency, class, and self-discovery (Waters, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

This article examines Waters' works through the lens of late 20th-century postmodern thought and third-wave feminism, influenced by deconstructionist philosophies that challenge traditional narratives (Derrida, 2010; O'Callaghan, 2015). Waters' approach to de-gendering and portraying queer identities diverges from conventional queer cinema by focusing on desire and identity as fundamental aspects of the human experience that transcend traditional gender binaries. For example, in *Tipping the Velvet*, the protagonist Nancy navigates different stages of love and self-discovery, reflecting Waters' emphasis on fluid and non-binary identities. This approach aligns with third-wave feminism, which critiques structuralist norms by embracing the complexity and diversity of gender and sexual identities (O'Callaghan, 2015).

This article investigates the narrative techniques and symbolic representations in Waters' works to understand queer characterization and its relation to broader themes of marginalization. For instance, the 'anthropomorphic representation of desire' refers to how Waters personifies desire through her characters, giving it human-like qualities that drive their actions and relationships. This concept has inspired a legacy in later queer films, highlighting the ongoing cultural dialogue between desire and identity (Farhall, 2020). By analyzing these elements, we can see how Waters uses symbolism to explore complex themes such as gender, class, and sexual desire.

Moreover, Waters' work is a testament to the enduring power of narrative to challenge and reshape societal norms. By deconstructing traditional gender roles and presenting complex, multidimensional characters, she invites readers and viewers to question their preconceptions and embrace a more inclusive understanding of identity. Her Neo-Victorian Trilogy not only revisits historical themes with a modern lens but also contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender and sexuality, offering new perspectives on the struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities.

In summary, this article seeks to elucidate the significant contributions of Sarah Waters' work to queer cinema and literature. By analyzing the narrative structures, thematic elements, and symbolic representations in her trilogy, the research aims to shed light on how her stories resonate with contemporary audiences and continue to influence the portrayal of queer identities in modern media.

2. Background of study

The self-identification of identity in Sarah Waters' work is deeply rooted in the context of the Third Feminist Movement and can be specifically analyzed in relation to this historical backdrop. O'Callaghan (2015) suggests that Waters' narratives revisit feminist debates about sexuality from the 1980s, exploring themes of sex, pornography, and other aspects through a lens of diversity. This study aims to analyze the construction of queer imagery in Waters' work from an authorship perspective within the framework of the Third Feminist Movement.

The Third Feminist Movement focuses on women regaining their self-esteem, a concept emphasizing that both genders need to work together towards mutual respect and self-worth. This idea was put forward by the American feminist activist Gloria Steinem in her book *Revolution from Within* (Steinem, 1993). Unlike the Second Feminist Movement, which often framed women and men as opposites, the Third Feminist Movement delved into philosophical reflections on women's roles in society, arguing that both women and men belong together in society and are not inherently different. Sarah Waters' work reflects this shift, portraying women not merely as rebels against male society but as individuals in search of self and a sustainable social equilibrium. This balance of self and social harmony can be seen in the identity themes discussed in the title.

Queer theory is an emerging theory from the early 1990s, proposed by the prominent feminist Lorde. Queer was first used in the West as a pejorative term for the homosexual community, and the notion of queer serves as a designation for a social group that encompasses all those whose sexual

orientations do not conform to the dominant culture and dominant societal norms of gender or sexuality, a category that encompasses both gay, lesbian, and bisexual positions, but also other potential orientation positions (Bradbury-Rance, 2019; Wenxiao, 2020).

Ershi (2009) suggests that the New Queer Cinema makes full use of postmodern perspectives and its aesthetics, questioning the centrality of gender identities while creating new images of gay men and lesbians. Queer cinema has delivered new values to audiences that are different from those of previous films, while complementing the development of the Third Feminist Movement. Harry M. Benshoff's book proposed that *Hedwig and the Angry Three Inchers* (2001) establishes the proposition of queer: desire and identity. After the Third Feminists Movement, gender consciousness erupted again, and the establishment of identity and sexual independence were raised, and women began to move from the margins to the center of the screen, which can be regarded as a response to the Third Feminists Movement by the creators of queer films.

Jia (2017) suggested that the new queer cinema reinterprets and promotes feminism. The author argues that the relationship between New Queer Cinema and the Third Woman Movement is a mutually reinforcing one, and not simply a development of feminism through Queer cinema. Nichols (2020) argues that the position frames the theory of queer cinema in a way that limits the creation of literature, film and television. There are political and philosophical differences in the exploration of sex and sexuality and identity in Queer cinema. Millner and Moore (2021) in their books takes an art historical and theoretical grounding in the perspective of Feminist, and Queer Studies, and most of the knowledge that the books dabble in is relevant to the study of this topic and is referenced on a historical level. These articles contribute significantly to the discourse on New Queer Cinema and its intersection with feminist movements, their analyses could be enriched by a deeper engagement with the evolving nature of these fields. It is crucial to balance historical grounding with an openness to new theoretical developments and practical innovations in queer and feminist storytelling. This balanced approach would ensure a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of the complex relationships between queer cinema and feminist movements.

Simon Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Volume 2 Chapter 3 The Lesbian states: 'In truth, homosexuality is no more a deliberate perversion than a fatal curse. It is an attitude that is chosen in situation; it is both motivated and freely adopted' (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 499). Combined with the Neo-Victorian Trilogy to be analyzed in this piece, the characters created by Sarah Waters fully display their gender identity and sexuality, realizing the sex expressed by the third woman as an independent individual, while the text combines the setting of the Victorian era, which gives rise to the conflict of class and destiny, which, together with the queers identity, adds to the tension of the text itself. The film and television texts also reflect the political and philosophical differences between the films of the queer mentioned in Nichols Bens article. Combined with the background of the Victorian era in Britain, the queer is a repressed and ascetic image, but the author believes that this is not a limitation. Despite the repressive and ascetic image of the queer in the Victorian context, this does not represent a limitation but rather an opportunity for post-modern reconstruction. These feminist movements achieve intertextuality in Waters' texts.

The new queer wave is a wave of cinema that emerged in the 1990s (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Since the 1980s, after the rise of the third wave of feminism, films about sexual minorities and third-world countries began to awaken, and Hollywood responded to the wave of feminism with good sister films, such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991). After the 1990s, there were more films about gay and fewer about lesbians, as there were more films about women's rights. By the end of the 20th century, queer cinema began to emphasize self-identification, moving away from external validation and towards internal self-definition.

In conclusion, the influence of the Third Feminist Movement on Sarah Waters' work is profound, providing a rich context for analyzing her portrayal of queer identities. Waters' narratives are deeply intertwined with the feminist and queer theoretical frameworks that emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Her work not only challenges and deconstructs traditional gender roles but also offers a nuanced exploration of identity, desire, and social equilibrium. By weaving these themes into the fabric of her storytelling, Waters contributes significantly to the discourse on gender and sexuality, leaving a lasting impact on both literature and cinema.

3. Methodology

This article employs content analysis and film semiotics, framed within postmodern and Third Feminist Movement theories. It focuses on Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Trilogy and compares it with other Victorian-era queer films and TV series to analyze the symbolic construction of queer identities.

Research design:

- **Content analysis:** The content analysis examines the development of film imagery and narrative techniques (Stemler, 2015). This involves identifying primary themes such as gender identity, class differences, and expressions of desire. The coding process involves developing a framework to systematically categorize these themes and symbols. Characters' behaviors and emotional changes are analyzed to understand identity processes. Multi-perspective narrative techniques are explored using postmodern deconstruction theory.
- **Semiotic Analysis:** Semiotic analysis interprets symbolic representations of gender, class, and desire. This involves identifying key visual and linguistic symbols and applying relevant theoretical frameworks to interpret these symbols. The symbols are categorized to analyze their meaning and context, and visual symbolism is explored to understand class differences.
- **Gender Identity:** Applying Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) concept of women as the 'Other,' the study analyzes how gender identity is constructed and represented. De Beauvoir's theory helps to understand the portrayal of women and the societal roles imposed on them.
- **Desire:** Using Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the 'Male gaze,' the study explores how desire is depicted and how female characters are objectified through visual representation. Mulvey's insights provide a lens to examine the dynamics of desire and the impact of the male gaze on female image construction.
- **Class Differences:** Jacques Derrida's (2010) postmodern deconstruction theory is used to analyze class differences and their symbolic representation. Derrida's approach helps to deconstruct binary oppositions and reveal the complexities of class and social hierarchy.

4. Postmodern Threshold Queer Film Creation

This article situates Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Trilogy at the confluence of late 20th-century postmodern thought and the emergence of the third wave of feminism. It posits that Waters' authorial perspective was significantly shaped by these intellectual currents, reflecting a deliberate engagement with the period's zeitgeist in her literary constructions. The deconstructionist philosophy as articulated by Jacques Derrida, is characterized by its challenge to centrality, uniformity, and structuralist norms (Derrida, 2010). That is discernible within the narrative fabric of Waters' trilogy. This chapter's analysis reveals that such a deconstructive ethos, emblematic of postmodern rebellion, resonates with the broader revolutionary spirit inherent in the production of queer cinema. The interplay of these dynamics within Waters' works provides a vantage point for understanding the subversive textures that define queer film narratives.

4.1. Subheading Multi-Perspective Narrative and the Fourth wall

Particularly noteworthy is the cinematic adaptation of Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, a constituent of her New Victorian Trilogy. The film exemplifies postmodern narrative strategies, eschewing traditional linear storytelling in favor of a multi-perspective, flashback-driven reconstruction of the plot. This non-linear structure, prevalent in suspense cinema, is adroitly utilized by Waters. She employs shifting viewpoints between the two female protagonists, oscillating from first-person to third-person narration—a technique emblematic of postmodernism aimed at reconfiguring linear progression. The narrative style of Robert McKee, discussed in his book, deconstructs traditional cinematic structural paradigms at a fundamental level, representing a break from narrative centrality and an innovative turn in Waters' creative oeuvre (McKee, 1997).

In *Tipping the Velvet*, the distinct chapter divisions—first love, purgatory, and paradise—and the film's editing and production techniques further manifest postmodern sensibilities. For instance, the depiction of Nancy's psychological turmoil upon discovering her first love's infidelity is conveyed through twisted cinematography, the use of dramatic music, and rapid juxtapositions of facial

expressions. Such techniques, while potentially jarring, are seamlessly woven into the film's fabric, aligning with Waters' portrayal of Nancy's internal struggles with love, identity, and gender. Moreover, the film subverts traditional theatrical and cinematic conventions by breaching the fourth wall, a concept popularized by playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and later by filmmakers such as Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* (1977). This deliberate act narrows the distance between the filmmaker and the audience, inviting a closer engagement with the protagonist's inner world (Brecht, 1964).

Gentleman Jack (2019), another film within the queer cinema genre, similarly employs the fourth wall break to startling and immersive effect. Such methods resonate with postmodern viewers' predilections for pan-entertainment, diversity, and decentralization, reflecting the alienation effect theorized by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht emphasized that by directly interacting with the audience, actors can break the illusion of the performance, prompting viewers to engage in critical thinking (Brecht, 1964).

These narrative devices—the multiplicity of perspectives and the dismantling of the fourth wall—when utilized in specific contexts, can yield profound impacts. From a narrative perspective, Sarah Waters' texts are imbued with a postmodern deconstructive ethos. As Derrida pointed out, deconstruction is not about mere destruction but about reconstructing meaning by revealing the inherent contradictions within structures (Derrida, 2016). Waters' works employ this deconstructive approach to redefine the boundaries of traditional narratives, creating unique and engaging story experiences.

4.2. Class Barriers and the Setting of Barriers to Masculinity

The Affinity ingeniously intertwines themes of psychic phenomena and mediumship. Contrary to some critical opinions that dismiss the film as merely a suspenseful narrative cloaked in homosexual themes, this study argues that Waters' creative intent was to broaden the expression of queer identity. The trilogy itself, while encompassing the genres of crime and suspense, provides a fertile ground for exploring identity, class, and desire. In *Affinity*, the class distinctions between Margaret, an upper-class woman, and Serena, a psychic medium imprisoned for murder, are sharply delineated. Waters' intentional contrast between the protagonists' social standings is a deliberate narrative device that foregrounds the class system as an impediment to queer identity (Yeh, 2014).

McKee (1997) had argued which posits that a film should present two to three pivotal plot obstacles, it becomes evident that class is a recurrent barrier in Waters' works, deeply rooted in the Victorian context. This class divide is a staple of many Victorian narratives, where ascension through societal ranks often represented the only avenue for women's empowerment. For instance, the representation of class is starkly portrayed in *The Harlots* (2017) and *Gentleman Jack*, a recurring motif in the depiction of British Victorian queer life.

Homosexuality, in 19th-century England, was a societal taboo, often leading to severe punishment (Adut, 2005). Yet, Waters does not erect insurmountable secular barriers against it in her texts; instead, she idealizes Victorian society to some extent. In *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, the narrative culminates in a lesbian bar scene, drawing a clever parallel between the first and third feminist movements, hinting at a more liberated and rebellious New Victorian Era.

The trilogy also shares a common thematic thread: the challenge of navigating a patriarchal society. In *Fingersmith*, alongside class disparity, the protagonists grapple with male dominance, as seen in the character of a con man scheming to share Miss Mauds' fortune and her uncles' repressive control (Yeh, 2014). This portrayal of men's constraints on women's autonomy and wealth is a recurring theme in Victorian cinema, with *Harlots* providing another apt example.

Plot obstacles in Waters' Trilogy are not only a narrative device but also serve as a critical examination of women's rights, reflecting a postmodern re-evaluation of Victorian women and a reconstruction of the era's feminist advocacy. Waters' portrayal of queer characters courageously challenges authority and societal norms, eschewing dated customs in favor of historical authenticity that reconstructs women's mentalities of the time (Madsen, 2015). By integrating postmodern narrative techniques, Waters redefines the representation of women in historical contexts, offering a nuanced perspective that resonates with contemporary feminist discourse.

Moreover, Waters' works invite viewers to question and deconstruct the rigid social structures that dictated gender roles and sexuality in the past. This deconstructive approach aligns with Jacques Derrida's theory, which emphasizes the importance of deconstructing traditional narratives to uncover

deeper truths and meanings (Derrida, 2016). By presenting complex, multifaceted characters, Waters not only enriches the genre of queer cinema but also contributes to a broader understanding of gender and sexuality in historical and modern contexts.

5. De-identification of the centered image of queer

The question of women's dependency on men for survival and their status as the second sex has ostensibly receded from the center of feminist discourse in the aftermath of the Third Feminist Movement. Viewing from a postmodern lens, this shift has profoundly influenced Sarah Waters literary endeavors. The Third Feminist Movements push for degendered perspectives has resonated within the 21st-century LGBT community's advocacy for gender-neutral recognition, reflecting a broader postmodern and feminist zeitgeist.

In Waters narratives, the motif of de-gendering is not only present but salient. Her texts diverge from traditional queer cinema, which often emphasizes the legitimacy of homosexuality as an expression of love rather than a criminal act. Instead, Waters portrayal of queer identities aligns more closely with the contemporary ethos that the only true sexuality is that of the heart's desire, transcending conventional gender binaries. This thematic choice encapsulates the ethos of the Third Feminist Movement and its postmodern underpinnings, marking a shift in the portrayal of gender and sexuality in literature.

5.1. De-gendering in the name of love

The core theme of love is consistently present in Sarah Waters' Victorian Trilogy, but the expression of love in her work is also deeply influenced by postmodernism and the third feminist movement.

For example, in *The Fingersmith's Choice*, the two heroines fall in love with each other naturally without being involved in the world. This does not overly exaggerate the pressure of the world but shows the proposition of love. Love is capable of transcending class, gender, and destiny, which is expressed in Sarah Waters text. The idea that fate binds two unrelated people together is expressed in her text. Some of the current queer films overly exaggerate homosexuality as a deviant and secular endeavor, which is still at a structural stage. In the theory of queer cinema, Ershi (2009) suggested that queer cinema is more inclined toward postmodern expression and that in the creation of queer cinema, what should be expressed is to go to the center of gender instead of over-expanding on structural problems, and that Queer directly translates to weird and abnormal, which is very close to the theory of postmodernism. This is very close to the theory of postmodernism, and the art of postmodernism is freer than that of modernism and classicism, rather than being limited in its creation (Gomolka, 2020). Sarah Waters Trilogy has set a good standard for queer films.

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, most queer films, such as *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Lan Yu* (2001), were much more straightforward in their presentation than they are now (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). In recent years, almost all queer films have begun to advocate absolute restraint in the expression of emotion, such as *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), and the current expression of love is stoic, which is of course related to the context of the times and different political policies mentioned in the theory of queer cinema. In Waters works, emotions are not restrained but rather released. Margaret plans to take the money belonging to her from her brother and run away with Serena in *Affinity*. Miss Mauds burning of her uncles study in *Fingersmith*, and Nancys unleashing of her heart in *Tipping the Velvet*, all of these are different from the current queer films, and if anything, current queer films are setting up more If the current queer films set up more mundane and social obstacles, the queer films of the late 20th and early 21st centuries were more unrestrained and closer to the creation of post-modern art.

Through love to show the questioning of the center of identity, Sarah Waters works focus on the issue. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy experiences different stages of love and laments about life, she has been exploring her own identity and gender, and at the beginning of the first love stage she is obsessed with Katie, obsessed with Katies dashing appearance, then later she cuts off her long hair and puts on a male costume, and then runs into the upper-class Diana. At the beginning of the first love stage she is obsessed with Katie, obsessed with Katies dashing appearance, and then later cuts off their long hair, puts on men's costumes, and then flows into the upper-class Diana, and Diana is desire, a kind of indelible sexuality. Finally, she returned to Florence's side to experience love, Nancy experienced different stages of love. Nancys whole experience is purgatory and paradise, and what she seeks in the end is her self-

recognition. In the figure of Nancy, what she has been seeking is love, abandoning the right to live in the aristocracy, abandoning her identity, and returning to love, which is the best answer to the de-centeredness of identity by Waters.

By focusing on the core theme of love, Waters' works challenge the rigid gender norms and societal constraints of their times. This approach aligns with postmodernist thought, which seeks to deconstruct established structures and reveal deeper meanings. Waters' characters navigate complex emotional landscapes, offering a rich exploration of love, identity, and self-recognition. Her portrayal of queer relationships not only defies conventional narratives but also provides a poignant commentary on the intersection of gender, class, and desire.

5.2. Women's self-redemption

The third feminist movement entered a philosophical dimension to think about women's place in society, arguing that both women and men belong together in society and are not born into it. Based on the creative background of the third feminist movement, Sarah Waters has also been towards escaping the second sex through the characters she creates in her writing (O'Callaghan, 2015). In the creation of the trilogy, she has portrayed the upper class, Miss Maud in *Fingersmith*, Diana in *Tipping the Velvet*, and Margaret in *Affinity*. The purpose of this portrayal of the class is firstly, to set up obstacles for the plot of the story, and secondly, to show how to get rid of the status of the second sex through class.

Women have long been in a subordinate position in a patriarchal society. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that the first feminist movement broke out in Europe, represented by Harriet Taylor Mill of Britain, who advocated equality between men and women (McCabe, 2023). At this time, women's consciousness gradually awakened. The topic of women's identity was also gradually put on the agenda, and the reason behind it was the unprecedented economic prosperity of the Victorian era in Britain. Economic prosperity also brings cultural and spiritual prosperity.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy challenges the discourse of the male-dominated society by pretending to be a man to gain a female identity. Although the film is a fictionalization of history, the film reflects the desire of women to gain identity at that time, and it also indirectly reflects the first feminist movement in the background of the era, which demanded equality between men and women and resisted the hegemony of men. The first feminist movements awakening of consciousness was relatively weak compared to the later feminist movement, so from *Tipping the Velvet* when Nancy dressed up as a man and stood on the stage, women lacked status compared to men's identity (Suwa, 2018). Then eventually Nancy also won the audiences favor by assuming a male identity. In the Victorian era, women changed themselves externally by dressing up and putting on make-up to acquire a male identity. At this time, Nancy's mentality had already been transformed, and Nancy ended up with the love of her life through her hard work, if we look at it from this point of view, Nancy was a woman who realized her own independent identity.

As stated in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

To do great things, today's woman needs above all forgetfulness of self: but to forget oneself one must first be solidly sure that one has already found oneself. Newly arrived in the world of men, barely supported by them, the woman is still much too busy looking for herself. (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 834)

In the intertextuality of the first and third feminist movements created by Sarah Waters, women seem to have escaped the status of the second sex. However, in essence, this kind of female independence is very difficult to realize. Capitalist society, the biological difference between men and women, and the male-dominated society all limit the emancipation of women's consciousness, and in a male-dominated society, the only way for women to realize their freedom is to be conscious of their destiny and class and to go beyond sex to freedom. In a male-dominated society, the only way for women to achieve freedom is to have a clear understanding of their destiny and class, to go beyond sex to understand themselves, to stop being subordinate to society, and to be their leader (Steinem, 1993). In the female film and television images portrayed in the Victoria Trilogy, although the female characters are still in a marginalized position, they have a different perception of sex, and do not rely on the perspective of sex. They do not rely on men to realize themselves from the perspective of sex. The image of Nancy is

constructed from the paradise of first love to the degradation of money and desire after the loss of love, and finally the rebirth and independence after the release. The whole process is also the self-redemption of women's destiny, class, and perception in the process of growing up. After this self-redemption, Nancy, the female character, becomes independent.

Meanwhile, in the Victorian Trilogy, some female characters are set on the margins of society, but while on the margins of society, they do not intend to sew with the times and depend on men. By analyzing *Affinity*, Margaret rejects the advances of men and pursues her love, Serena, independently, and finally commits suicide by plunging into the river with her illusions about her love and her hatred for the great injustice of society. When Margaret jumps into the river, this image also serves as a symbol to convey to the audience that woman in the Victorian era of England had no limit to their desire for freedom and love, which is also linked to the first feminist movement of the same period. Margaret embodies women's quest for autonomy, opting for societal detachment over dependence in a patriarchal context.

Mulvey proposed women as a passive image and men as the main image and believes that the image of women gazed at on the screen is the domination of men over women in a patriarchal society (Mulvey, 1975). In the Victorian Trilogy, women are always watched by men, and there is also a desire to conquer women through the entry of men's point of view. In another perspective, it is the women's disobedience to the fate of society and the struggle to break free, and the women's characters in the Victorian Trilogy finally succeed in breaking away from the male gaze. The female characters in the Victorian Trilogy eventually succeed in escaping from the male gaze. Maud escapes from her uncles clutches in *Fingersmith* and Sue escapes from the lunatic asylum; Nancy switches between male and female identities as she pleases, which is a symbol of equality between the genders; and Margaret jumps into the river in *Affinity* for the sake of love. The fact that these female characters are not shackled by fate also shows that Mulvey's view is somewhat misguided. Women can also break free from patriarchal society to achieve independence through self-redemption, rather than being completely dependent on male identity.

The queer community is even more desperate for their own salvation. In traditional Christian culture, the existence of homosexuality is not normal and is the embodiment of sin (McQueeney, 2009). Therefore, in the Trilogy, each character of the queer is in search of their salvation. From the perspective of social power relations, the queer is an influence on the existence of the traditional social order, the self-discipline, and other-discipline proposed by Adorno of the Frankfurt School, and the sexual orientation of the queer can simply be said to be the self-regulation and other-discipline of the queer. The sexual orientation of queer can be simply said to be self-discipline, while in society, they must be restricted by other discipline, which is closely related to the ideology of each period (Millner & Moore, 2021). In the context of the Victorian era, it is difficult to break through the constraints of the upper class. When analyzed from the perspective of film and television texts, although society has a certain impact on the queer identity, it is not necessarily negative, but rather promotes the outbreak of self-discipline.

6. Symbolic Interpretation of Desire and Identity

6.1. Lesbian Symbol-Oyster

One of the most obvious expressions of desire is the oyster. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy is born into a family that has been living on oysters for generations. One of the lines means that oysters are a kind of asexual animal that can be male or female, which is a hint of Nancys destiny. Meanwhile, Nancys parents also liken Nancy to an oyster, saying that when she was a child, she was an oyster that was going to be eaten by gourmands and that they saved Nancy from that fate. The greedy guests can also be seen as a corrupt bourgeois society. The oyster also serves as a symbolic desire in later queer films and works with queer plots. For example, in Abdellatif Kechiche's film *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Emma invites Adele to her home, where she is served oysters. Emma's family is more open-minded, and Emma and Adele have sex after the meal, which is much more open-minded than the sexual relationship between the two of them in Adele's home, and thus shows that queer identity is more eager to desire. The queer identity is therefore clearly more desirous of desire output. In *Harlots*, the queer plot also includes the feeding of oysters to each other, and the oyster has become a more solidified symbol of lesbianism in queer cinema since *Tipping the Velvet*.

Why oyster is the symbol of desire in Sarah Waters works? In terms of appearance and inner appearance of oysters, oyster has similarities with female genitalia, so female genitalia were often compared to oysters in early Europe. Meanwhile, the researcher was doing historical background research, which combined the film and television work *Harlots*, which is set in the mid-18th century in London, England, where most of the women worked as prostitutes for a living. Some aristocratic men flirted with the women in the courtesan field and said: Let me see your delicate oyster. The word oyster clearly represents the female genitalia. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy invites Katie to her home to eat oysters, at which time Nancy's desire for Katie is already close to exploding, thus driving the plot of Nancy following Katie to London.

In *The Second Sex*, it is stated that the inseparable synthesis of attraction and repulsion characterizes female desire. Female desire struggles with resistance and attraction, and Freudian scholars have argued that male desire is active, while female desire is passive (De Beauvoir, 1949).

It is not difficult to see that men in the Neo-Victorian Trilogy always have active and conquering desires for women. For example, Margaret, the young lady in *Affinity*, is constantly pestered by the men who are pursuing her and is even almost raped. This kind of male conquest is primitive desire, while the theme of the New Victorian Trilogy is to express lesbianism, the emotion between the queer is repressed, not daring to release too much. Still, it is never passive sexual desire, which can also be called primitive sexual desire, Nichols Ben puts forward the idea that the position frames the theory of the queer film, making the literature, film and television creation limited. literature, film, and television creation limited (Nichols, 2020). There are political and philosophical differences in the exploration of sex and sexuality and identity in queer films. The Neo-Victorian trilogy is set in the historical context of the Victorian era when women's consciousness was more open than before, but homosexuality was still a taboo subject. The theme of homosexuality still exists as a taboo, especially in a lower-class society where it is not recognized (Zubiel-Kasprowicz, 2017). Therefore, the desires expressed in it are always repressed and can only be released after several identifications of identity. From this point of view, the relationship between desire and identity in queer films is complementary.

6.2. Female identity-Desire for Reproductive Organs

Identity has always been a key point of pursuit for the LGBTQ community, so the expression of identity has always been central to queer films. However, in the last century, the emergence of queer in cinema has been met with more skepticism because in the early days of queer cinema, such as *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), queer identity was expressed out of a sense of curiosity and voyeurism. Many of these queer films were consumed with queer identity, which was not always the case. Many of these queer films consume queer identity to create a selling point for the film. In the Neo-Victorian Trilogy, the expression of the queer identity is more on the path of self-identity.

In Christian Metz's book *Imaginary Signifier*, the two concepts of Signified and Signifier are proposed (Metz, 1981). This paper mainly focuses on the expression can refer in the Neo-Victorian Trilogy, and it borrow the symbol of Signifier to interpret the construction of queer identity in the Neo-Victorian Trilogy. *Fingersmith* recreates in detail the obsession of upper-class Victorian women with gloves, which as a symbol of able to point conveys to us that the lady or the upper-class woman is a woman who has been made to wear gloves by a woman who has been made to wear gloves (Dove, 2019). Miss or the upper-class women are bound by the symbolic identity of gloves, and Miss has been trying to break the confinement of this identity, just like her identity as a queer. From another point of view, Sue is the one who removes the glove for Miss, where the glove is given double meanings, not only class identity but also the meaning of breaking through the world to express the love between the two women. In Neo-Victorian Trilogy, the glove is on the one hand a restoration of history, and on the other hand the notion of class and identity injected by Sarah Waters as the author Arias (2017).

In *Fingersmith*, Miss Maud is always imprisoned by her uncle and has no freedom. At the beginning of the film, the symbol of the finger in the uncle's study hints at the theme that the servants cannot cross the boundary of the finger floor. The symbol of the finger, when analyzed from a physiological point of view, can be used as a female genital organ in Lesbian. *The Second Sex* stated that women, as the second sex, have always longed for a genital organ since they were subconsciously influenced as children and that women's longing for male genitals is more a result of their inferiority and defects than of their inferiority (De Beauvoir, 1949). It is for their low self-esteem and defects, so fingers are often used in

lesbian films to replace this sexual organ. So, at the beginning of the film, Sue is not allowed to be entered behind this fingerboard, Maud and Sues relationship is still uncertain at that time, by the end of the film, Sue goes to Mauds home to look for Maud, Sue naturally crosses the boundary of the finger, which expresses the queer identification with her own identity. Based on *The Second Sex*, women's desire for genitals, however, lesbian identity is also more eager to get a genital identity. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy is supported by Diana when she is down and out, and a dildo appears in their sex life, which indirectly shows the lesbian identity's desire for genitals. The desire for the lesbian identity for genitals, which is not dependent on men, but rather an exploration of one's own identity as a lesbian, is expressed in many queer films, especially in lesbian films. For example, the HBO and BBC co-production *Gentleman Jack*, which is adapted from *The Secret Diary of Anne Lister*, is also a film and television drama adapted from the real-life story of Anne Lister (Matthews, 2022). In this drama, Anne Lister as a lesbian identity dresses up as a male appearance, and the background of this story also takes place in the Victorian era, so as a lesbian why do you want to pretend to be a male (Butler, 2009). Some of the experiences of Anne in *Gentleman Jack* are also very similar to those of *Tipping the Velvet* of Nancy, so we can compare a text based on a real experience with a new historical text created from a postmodern perspective.

6.3. Active and passive aspects of identity

In *Gentleman Jack*, Anne Lister identifies as a rich and powerful woman. who dresses as a woman and identifies as a woman in terms of her psychological gender, and as a Lesbian in the standard sense of the word, not in terms of Transition; she dresses as a man, which, according to the original story, her diary entries indicate that she was trying to get a voice for women in those days, and that she felt that women could be as free and dignified as men (Matthews, 2022). *Gentleman Jack* takes place in the early Victorian era, the economic life of the Victorian era is in an upward stage, based on a family background of Anne, her pursuit of freedom and identity is an active psychology. And based on the mid-19th century, the era when the first feminist movement was about to germinate, the female consciousness had nearly exploded, according to the first women's movement, men and women were equal and women could have the same status and freedom as men, Anne naturally was also in these women's category, it can be seen that the formation of lesbianism in that era, on the one hand, was due to the background of the era, the influx of thinking, on the other hand, it was a mental born from within. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the era is in the period after the outbreak of the first feminist movement, during this time the female consciousness was more popular compared to Annes era, at this time Nancys character seems to be in a passive state of choice, she saw Katie dressed as a woman and was fascinated by this kind of appearance, she felt that this kind of maverick woman is very attractive to her and slowly embarked on the path of self-awareness. Comparing the two films, it is found that there is a difference between active and passive in the construction of queer images and the perception of her identity.

The Neo-Victorian Trilogy by Sarah Waters showcases aspects of identity, with the protagonists in *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* depicted as more active in their self-identification compared to the more passive Nancy in *Tipping the Velvet*. Taken together, queer perception of her own identity is partly formed from her continuous experience and growth, while most of it is chosen by herself. In the above analysis, then, if we compare it with what Simone de Beauvoir says in the chapter Lesbians in *The Second Sex* that means for women, homosexuality can be a way of escaping from their situation or a way of living with it (De Beauvoir, 1949). This idea was highly regarded in women's studies at the time, but analyzed today, the author argues that homosexuality is not so much an escape from one's situation as a psychological choice, but on the contrary, a deciphering of the situation. It is mentioned in the book that in most homosexuals, the influence of sexual orientation is due to the family environment, the influence of the lack of acquired reproductive organs, fleeing from the environment, and, to a certain extent, the DNA will determine the child's sexual orientation homosexuality has both active and passive choice. In authors opinion, homosexuals' identity is not only a passive decision but also an active decision, which can be seen in the research text of this chapter and the comparative research text.

Beauvoir also suggests that:

In truth, homosexuality is no more a deliberate perversion than a fatal curse. It is an attitude that is chosen in situation; it is both motivated and freely adopted. None of the factors the subject accepts in this choice—physiological facts, psychological history, or social circumstances—is determining, although all contribute to explaining it. (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 499)

7. Framework

The article provides an in-depth analysis of queer cinema symbolism, focusing particularly on the Victorian Trilogy, through the application of feminist film semiotics. This approach is utilized to illuminate themes of identity and salvation within queer narratives. The research proposes a comprehensive framework designed to facilitate further analysis and exploration of these themes, offering a robust structure for examining the symbolic dimensions of queer films.

This framework aims to encapsulate the core significance of symbols in queer cinema, primarily through the representation of homosexuality and the profound analysis of symbolic meanings. It delineates two primary methodologies for analyzing this significance: the depiction of homosexuality within cinematic narratives and the deep, interpretative examination of symbols used to convey underlying themes. By applying these methodologies, the framework seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how symbols function within queer cinema to articulate themes of identity, salvation, and desire.

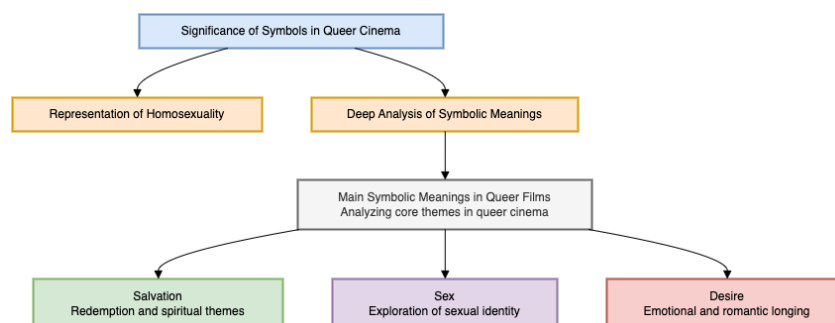
At the culmination of this analytical process, the framework identifies three central themes that significantly contribute to the discourse within queer cinema: salvation, sex, and desire. These themes are critical in understanding the narrative and symbolic construction of queer identities within films. Salvation is examined in the context of the characters' journeys towards self-acceptance and societal recognition. The theme of sex is explored not merely as a physical act but as a symbolic representation of deeper identity struggles and connections. Desire is analyzed as a driving force that shapes the characters' motivations and narrative arcs, symbolizing both personal and collective yearnings for acceptance and love.

The study acknowledges its limitations, particularly the restricted number of film cases analyzed. This limitation suggests a clear direction for future research, emphasizing the need to expand the sample size to achieve a more comprehensive analysis. By including a broader array of films, future research can provide a more detailed and varied understanding of the symbolic and thematic elements within queer cinema.

Moreover, the framework highlights the critical role of audience response in evaluating the social impact of queer films. Understanding how audiences perceive and engage with these films is essential for assessing their broader cultural and social significance. This recognition underscores the importance of considering audience reception as a key factor in the continued study and evaluation of queer cinema.

In summary, the proposed framework serves as a structured guide for analyzing the symbolic representation of queer identities in cinema, emphasizing the interconnected themes of salvation, sex, and desire. It calls for an expanded analysis that includes a wider range of films and a deeper consideration of audience responses to fully assess the social impact of queer cinema.

Figure 1. Framework of queer Film symbolic analysis



Source: Own elaboration.

8. Conclusion

The article discusses the portrayal of queer identity in Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Trilogy and its significant contribution to queer cinema. This paper emphasizes postmodern narrative techniques and the symbolism of femininity within this genre. While queer films have evolved towards a more nuanced representation, the central themes of desire, identity, and redemption persist (Bradbury-Rance, 2019). The legacy of the trilogy continues in modern queer cinema, expressed through the theme of love, highlighting the enduring significance of these works.

Contemporary queer cinema, evolving alongside societal changes, preserves the essential themes of desire, identity, and redemption found in Sarah Waters' influential Neo-Victorian Trilogy (Madsen, 2015). Its enduring postmodern approach and the symbolism of love and femininity remain core to the genre's narrative.

From a future creation perspective, the shift of queer films to OTT platforms signifies an increase in the variety of imagery within queer cinema. Bradbury-Rance (2023) highlights how Netflix serves as a queer method, providing a new platform to showcase diverse imagery to audiences. Although current queer expressions face certain limitations, the best way to address these challenges is to encourage more creators to engage in queer film production. Derrida (2010) also spoke about deconstruction fostering a pluralistic era, suggesting that by embracing different perspectives, we can better understand and respect the LGBTQ+ community.

Ultimately, advancing the representation and construction of queer imagery in cinema requires cultivating an environment where diverse voices and stories can flourish. This approach will not only enrich the genre but also ensure that queer cinema continues to evolve and resonate with audiences worldwide.

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