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"The lives of the wicked" : love, death, and the hero in Sondheim's Sweeney Todd

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ABSTRACT

“THE LIVES OF THE WICKED”: LOVE, DEATH, AND THE HERO IN SONDHEIM’S *SWEENEY TODD*

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This thesis discusses Stephen Sondheim’s 1979 musical adaptation of the novel that originated the story of Sweeney Todd in 1846, *The String of Pearls*. Sondheim’s musical has been lastingly popular with its American audience despite the story’s British roots, due in large part to the American innovation of the tale. Sondheim’s Americanization emphasizes several themes, already staples of American culture as evidenced by trends in popular cultural artifacts such as Batman, which speak to American audiences and allow them to connect with the British story of Sweeney Todd. In Sondheim’s transformation, the villainous Sweeney Todd becomes a complex lover, along with his companion characters, and he is driven to extremes by love and his deprivation of it. Sondheim also exploits the filthy Victorian setting of the story to relate directly to his immediate New York audience and underscore trends of corruption in its real-world judicial system as well as that of the fictional London. This corruption becomes a problem Americans cannot stand to see unsolved, and Sweeney Todd transforms under Sondheim’s hand into a vigilante hero the likes of the already-beloved Dark Knight, highlighting an optimistic and essentially American skepticism of tragedy and belief in the power of individuals to effect change.

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“THE LIVES OF THE WICKED”: LOVE, DEATH, AND THE HERO IN SONDHEIM’S
SWEENEY TODD

BY

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PREFACE

Sweeney Todd, the infamous demon barber of Fleet Street, has long been a larger-than-life figure of London history. The inspiration for the wildly popular penny blood of 1846-1847 and the string of subsequent page, stage, and screen adaptations was, by popular account, a real person, born and brought up in London until his trial and execution for countless gruesome murders in 1801 in the same city. According to Robert Mack, one of the world's leading students of the Sweeney Todd story,

Sweeney Todd was born on 26 October 1756 into the family of a poor weaver living in Stephney. As a child, he spent whatever spare time he had visiting the nearby Tower of London, just to the west, where he took particular interest in the collection of grotesque instruments of torture, and enjoyed watching the wardens feed the ravenous lions housed within the fortress on bones and large chunks of raw meat. In the bitter winter of 1768, when the young Todd was just 12 years old, his parents unaccountably disappeared from their Brick Lane dwelling, either perishing from the cold, or simply abandoning their son to the city streets. Todd managed to find refuge as an apprentice to a cutler, one John Crook, who ran a shop in Holborn; it was in Crook's workshop that he first learned that facility with razors and other sharp instruments that was to serve him so profitably later in life. After working two years as an apprentice to Crook, he was arrested on a charge of petty theft, and sentenced to five years in Newgate Prison. In the course of his imprisonment, he began to serve as a "soap boy" or assistant to the prison's resident barber. (79)

The rest of Todd's biography is as detailed as this passage, but as far as anyone can tell, the story is merely a myth. Yet so certain have Londoners traditionally been that Sweeney Todd was a real citizen that "well into the twentieth century, there was no shortage of residents who could be called upon to point out the precise address of Todd's tonsorial parlour" (Mack 78).

Drawing from even older tales of British murderers and cannibals,¹ Todd's story has unsurprisingly become an insistent fixture of British legend. But the American composer Stephen Sondheim and, subsequently, his American audiences since the 1970s have become similarly enraptured by the tale of Sweeney Todd, which is remarkable for several reasons. The first is that the story has undergone countless revisions and alterations; though most adaptations share a few key features, there is no one authoritative Sweeney Todd story. Further, after so many revisions and adaptations, the legend had—by the time Sondheim picked up the tale in the 1970s—been told and told again, drawing more and more criticism from increasingly bored British audiences. Countless novels and theater productions, but also three films, at least two radio plays, a ballet, and several music hall performances, had already told and retold “Sweeney Todd” to the British public by the time *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* found its way to Broadway (Mack 351), and Todd had been sometimes dismissed, according to Mack, “as the epitome of mere melodramatic excess” (272).

Certain revivals over the preceding few decades had certainly rejuvenated the taste for Todd of some audiences, but on the whole, interest in Todd's story was beginning to decline. Most significantly, though, is the fact that the legend of Sweeney Todd had relied, as it still does in every single version, specifically on London geographies. Subterranean Fleet Street and the bells of St. Dunstan's church are almost their own characters in most adaptations, and they remain, importantly, easily recognizable to British audiences, especially Londoners. Less

¹ See Mack

familiar with such quintessentially London locales are, of course, American audiences, especially in 1979 when Sondheim adapted his musical. It is odd and telling, then, that an audience familiar with Big Ben and perhaps Abbey Road, but unfamiliar with Fleet Street and its varying reputation, would fall so fast in love with the tale of Sweeney Todd and his misdeeds.

This transformational journey that Todd's narrative would undertake began in the autumn of 1846, when Edward Lloyd's newspaper, *The People's Periodical and Family Library*, began publishing chapters of a penny blood² titled *The String of Pearls: A Romance*. In this original version, Todd is an off-putting but unassuming Fleet Street barber whose customers sometimes mysteriously disappear. One such unfortunate client stops in for a shave on his way to deliver a very valuable string of pearls to Johanna Oakley from her presumed-dead lover, Mark Ingestrie. This messenger, Ingestrie's friend Thornhill, never makes it to Johanna's home; his trail stops at Sweeney Todd's parlor. A colleague of both Ingestrie and Thornhill, Colonel Jeffrey, teams up with Johanna and, later, with the magistrate to investigate the circumstances of Thornhill's disappearance and Ingestrie's death. Todd, in possession of the string of pearls "left" at his business establishment by Thornhill, deals with the suspicion of his young apprentice, Tobias Ragg, after a failed attempt to sell the pearls for the £12,000 they are worth. Meanwhile Mrs. Lovett, the widowed owner of a very successful local meat pie shop, employs a new assistant who soon discovers the horrors of the inescapable subterranean bakehouse and its surrounding labyrinth of tunnels, through which meat mysteriously appears in the dead of night. Locals in the area begin to complain of a horrible stench in and around St. Dunstan's Church, just down the

² Penny bloods were precursors to the famous penny dreadfuls, The bloods were popular during the first half of the nineteenth century and featured predominantly criminals, pickpockets and highwaymen, as their protagonists (Mack 136)

street from Todd's Fleet Street barbershop, leading to the discovery of human remains beneath the floors of the church. Mark Ingestrie, revealed as the bakehouse assistant hired by Mrs. Lovett, announces to Lovett's shop full of customers that the pies they are eating contain the flesh of Todd's victims. The novel concludes with Mrs. Lovett poisoned to death by Todd, the lovers reunited, Todd hanged for murder, and the people of London forever haunted by the case of Sweeney Todd.

Following the conclusion of this serial, dozens of adaptations for the page, stage, and screen appeared throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it was not until the 1970s that the story began to shift toward something else altogether. In 1968, young British actor Christopher Bond adapted the manuscript of Dibdin Pitt's original 1847 play into a scarcely recognizable work, keeping, as nearly every other adaptation had in the past, Sweeney Todd, Mrs. Lovett, the barber's chair, and the cannibalism but essentially spinning a new tale with new motivations for Todd's murderous activities and Mrs. Lovett's assistance. The show was not unpopular with British audiences, but Bond himself confesses that "until [Sondheim] performed his alchemical miracle on it, it remained a neat pastiche that worked well if performed with sufficient panache, but base metal nonetheless" (4). With some involvement by Bond, and with the help of Hugh Wheeler and Hal Prince, who would direct the first production, Sondheim transformed the play into something more resonant with American sensibilities. After Sondheim's musical resurrection, this new story became immensely and, it seems safe now to say, lastingly popular with British audiences but also with American audiences heretofore unfamiliar with Sweeney Todd and his century-plus-old tale.

Sondheim's version opens with Sweeney Todd's return to London after escaping the Australian prison to which he was wrongfully transported for life by the covetous Judge Turpin and his lackey Beadle Bamford. Todd leaves Anthony, the young sailor who has saved him from the open ocean, and wanders into Mrs. Lovett's meat pie shop, located beneath his former tonsorial parlor and home. Mrs. Lovett recognizes him as Benjamin Barker, the barber, and tells him that his wife Lucy took poison after being raped by Judge Turpin, who has taken Todd's daughter Johanna in as his own child. Enraged by the wrongs done to him by Turpin and Bamford, Todd immediately hatches a plan to rebuild his business and exact vengeance. He earns a favorable reputation by defeating a traveling barber in a shaving contest. The barber, Pirelli, comes to Todd's shop to blackmail him, and Todd murders him. Mrs. Lovett suggests that, to save her failing business and hide the corpses of Pirelli and Todd's future victims, they bake the flesh of the deceased into the meat pies. They also take in Tobias, Pirelli's abused young assistant. Meanwhile, Anthony meets Johanna and the two fall in love. When Todd is finally about to murder Turpin, Anthony bursts in to seek help stealing Johanna away from the Judge, who leaves before Todd can finish the job. Eventually, Todd murders Beadle Bamford, the Judge, and the insane Beggar Woman, who has stumbled into his shop seeking Mrs. Lovett. When Todd sees the Beggar Woman's body, he realizes she is his wife, Lucy. Furious that Mrs. Lovett has lied about her death, he murders Mrs. Lovett. Tobias finds Todd crying over his wife's corpse and slits Todd's throat with his own discarded razor, ending the reign of the demon barber.

When *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* first appeared on Broadway in 1979, urban American life was very different from urban life in Britain in the 1840s, and yet the

story has been hugely popular with audiences in both times. Reflecting on his experience of writing the musical, Sondheim writes, “I wanted it taken seriously by an audience today, the way the original Sweeney Todd was taken seriously in the nineteenth century” (6). His musical was certainly taken seriously by its immediate audience, and it continues to resonate with twenty-first-century American audiences as well.

In this thesis, I will argue that the musical’s success is due to Sondheim’s transformation of the original work into a story that maintains its basic narrative but that exploits solidly American fixations. His version takes the avaricious, murderous barber and transforms him, along with all of his companion characters, into an obsessive lover. It takes a British cityscape and transplants the contemporary atmosphere of New York City—without moving the action of the story. Exploring these particularly American urban themes—along with a villain not altogether terrifying to a sympathetic audience—Sondheim finally presents a hero who can hope to solve the problems of obsession and urban uncleanness: a vigilante in Sweeney Todd the likes of Frank Miller’s Dark Knight. Read against its predecessors, Sondheim’s innovations on the Sweeney Todd story, which builds on Bond’s British version, reveal some crucial concerns of American urban culture in 1979 and onward.

To approach the question of Sweeney Todd’s longevity through an American lens, this thesis will work through the pivotal points of Sondheim’s adaptation of the story. Sondheim’s most obvious contribution is his reimagining the characters’ motivations for their actions. The Victorian Sweeney Todd was little more than an uncomplicated—if fascinating—serial murderer, but Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd is an emotional and even sympathetic antihero. He loves deeply, if not widely, and significantly, as do all of the other characters in the musical. As I

will argue in the first chapter, this refocusing of the central conflicts in the story reflects an essentially American preoccupation with love in the late twentieth century. In the second chapter, I will explore the themes of urban filth and bodily decay, concerns of both Victorian Londoners and 1970s New Yorkers. One of the most striking curiosities of *Sweeney Todd*'s continued popularity is the fact that modern residents of (and visitors to) New York connect so deeply with a story that not only takes place but depends on its situation in London. As this second chapter will argue, the focus of Sondheim's version on filth in the urban setting speaks to the specific worries of late-twentieth-century urban-dwelling Americans. Finally, building upon what the first two chapters will establish, the third chapter will argue that Sondheim's Sweeney Todd is a prototype of Frank Miller's Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*, an especially American story that has been vital to American popular culture since its release. Americans reject tragedy, and the optimism of Sweeney Todd as vigilante, as he is in Sondheim's version but not Lloyd's original version, calls for a reading of twentieth-century American culture as dependent on antiheroes like the Dark Knight and Sweeney Todd to solve the very problems that they and their actions create.

CHAPTER ONE
“ALWAYS HAD A FONDNESS FOR YOU”: LOVE AND OBSESSION

Numerous critics have commented on the continued interest in Sweeney Todd’s story, mostly focusing on the universality of its most common themes: hate, revenge, and especially love. “We care about the characters in *Sweeney*,” Christopher Bond writes, suggesting that the show might also be subtitled *Aspects of Love*, “because they care so passionately about each other” (6). Sondheim has been open about his original intention to stage his musical as a small show with a relatively bare stage; the plan was to focus not on the vast iron labyrinth of urban filth, but on the intimate resonances of Todd’s story. And though this vision was not immediately realized, as the original production opened at the massive Uris Theater, necessitating a more ambitious set, Todd’s lasting grudge against his transgressors is deeply rooted in love and therefore close to the heart of his audience members.

Certainly, such is a theme that is expressed in the play’s lyrics. “Nothing can help, no one can hide you,” the company of Sondheim’s musical reminds us just before the end of the show, “Isn’t that Sweeney there beside you?” (203). The actors onstage point out into the audience, shouting, “There!” and Sweeney Todd himself rises again from the grave to warn, “To seek revenge may lead to hell.” Mrs. Lovett, finally, joins in with, “But *everyone* does it, and seldom as well” (204, added emphasis). Audiences have had mixed reactions to this conclusion, some feeling needlessly accused and others assuming they are to suppose a literal demon barber (or demon mail carrier, demon used-car salesman, demon dog catcher...) exists in their very

neighborhood. Sondheim's intention, though, was merely to bring the audience back to the human roots of the story; Todd's motivation for murder is revenge on Judge Turpin and his beadle for the rape and death of Todd's wife and the abduction of his daughter. While his position as an innocent convict escaped from Australia is difficult to relate to, his desire for retribution still inspires sympathy. In 1846, the character was quite different; he had, for example, no wife or daughter to avenge. Though avarice is hardly a monstrous crime in itself, the Todd of Victorian Britain is sufficiently deplorable for his cruelty and the extreme to which he takes his search for fortune. Sondheim builds on Bond's transformation of the narrative and gives Todd's obsession a more familiar cause. "To me," Sondheim writes, "Sweeney Todd was a story of personal obsession" (11).

The love story that becomes a major focus of Sondheim's version is present in the original penny blood, but the fascination of the original hinges on Todd as the villain, who, though interesting, is unquestionably evil; the focus is on his crimes as well as his pursuit by Johanna, Tobias, Colonel Jeffrey, and the magistrate. As Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones point out,

In the Bond version, there is a tight circle of desire which motivates much of the action (Turpin-Lucy, Anthony-Johanna, Lovett-Sweeney), but in the nineteenth century versions, unrequited love was represented in the form of the more marginalized form of Colonel Jeffrey, who falls in love with Johanna even whilst delivering the news of the supposed death of her sweetheart. (3)

The original novel is subtitled, "A Romance," referring to what ends up feeling like an afterthought: the arc between Johanna and Mark Ingestrie. It is difficult to call their story a "romance," as from the opening of the novel Mark is presumed dead. There is some romantic tension between Johanna and Colonel Jeffrey, as Poore and Jones suggest, but even this is not

fully explored, as the focal point of the novel is Sweeney Todd, both his character and his choices. Because Johanna is connected to the barber only by way of Thornhill's murder, the relationship between the two stories is tenuous and Johanna's plot plays a secondary role to Todd's. By the end of the novel, Mark is the one to reveal to Mrs. Lovett's lawyer customers that they have been unwitting cannibals for years, and he and Johanna are reunited. They go on to live a happy life together, but both are haunted by the horrors of Todd's murderous activities and Mrs. Lovett's dungeon bakehouse.

Tobias, Todd's mistreated apprentice who discovers his horrible secret, is also partially motivated by concern for something other than his own private interests. Whenever Todd finds himself suspicious of Tobias's inquiries, he threatens Tobias's mother, a poor woman whose punishable secret Todd claims to know. The threat is effective for a while; Tobias does not dare investigate Todd's mysterious business during the first half of the novel. Still, most of Tobias's actions are driven more by fear of his own death at Todd's hand than by concern for his mother, who after all appears in only one scene. There comes a point at which Tobias's concern for himself and for the clients he suspects Todd has murdered outweighs his fear for his mother. Tobias also expresses his sympathy for the lost "love" of the woman he meets in Fogg's madhouse, but he leaves her behind with little more than a backward glance when she falls and is caught trying to escape with him. He is certainly one of the most poorly treated and therefore sympathetic characters in the novel, and yet even he is not fully capable of the kind of love infused into the narrative in its later version.

If there is any character in *The String of Pearls* whose actions are impelled by some kind of love, it is Sweeney Todd himself. But far from romantic love or intimacy, his motivating

relationship is his obsession with material wealth. Like the Todd of Sondheim's twentieth-century version, he is willing to do anything in pursuit of his goal. The original novelist explains,

There can be no doubt but that the love of money was the predominant feeling in Sweeney Todd's intellectual organization and that, by the amount it would bring him, or the amount it would deprive him of, he measured everything. With such a man, then, no question of morality or ordinary feeling could arise, and there can be no doubt but that he would quite willingly have sacrificed the whole human race, if, by doing so, he could have achieved any of the objects of his ambition. (141)

The differentiating factor between this original version of the character and Sondheim's, however, is the latter's inescapable humanity, despite his crimes. The original Sweeney Todd is described as a grotesque and odd-looking apparition who just barely passes for human: "a long, low-jointed, ill-put-together sort of fellow, with an immense mouth, and such huge hands and feet that he was, in his way, quite a natural curiosity" (4). Sondheim's Todd is decidedly different.¹ He is to all appearances perfectly respectable, usually soft-spoken, even polite. Sweeney Todd is an ordinary man, simply driven to murderous extremes by the lecherous inhumanity of Judge Turpin and the unsympathetic upper class of London. True, Todd is a focused and driven murderer who condones and enables anthropophagy, but as Poore and Jones suggest, "The idea of some kind of love or loyalty helping to motivate such repellent behavior seems to continue to exert a peculiar fascination" (7). And so it has; Sondheim's Sweeney Todd is a much more sympathetic and compelling character for American audiences because he is inclined to murder not by greed or fear or even lust, but by love.

When *The String of Pearls* first began serialization in the autumn of 1846, its British readers were interested in the crimes of highwaymen in and around the growing metropolis of

¹ Burton's film version, however, returns the character visually to this extreme.

London. Sweeney Todd would have been an effective scapegoat for those anxieties, an inhuman monster single-mindedly seeking wealth. Sondheim's 1979 American audience, though, was more interested in love and obsession, themes somewhat more present in Bond's version than in the original and in fact the major focus of Sondheim's musical, by his own admission:

I think of Sweeney Todd as a person so passionate on one subject that he has no energy for anything else. He is hot after one goal, becomes sidetracked because of circumstances and goes crazy until suddenly another lucky chance happens and he is able to proceed along his path, destroying everything along the way. He is a man interested in only one thing, and he is animated only when he is in active pursuit of that goal. (14)

Even from before the opening chords of the musical, Sweeney Todd has been hard at work to return to his family in London. When he first appears on stage, he has already escaped from an Australian prison, and he has been rescued in the middle of the ocean by Anthony and his ship. Throughout the story, Todd goes to extraordinary lengths for the two people he loves. Upon his return to London, he quickly settles on a plan—one that, as the company reveals in the opening number, is meticulously thought out: “Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned/Like a perfect machine ‘e planned” (25). This plan—less explicitly laid out in Sondheim's adaptation than in Bond's—is to seek revenge on Judge Turpin and the beadle for the wrongs they've done to him and to his family.

His disillusionment with humanity is apparent as soon as he arrives in London. In Sondheim's version, he sings, “There's a hole in the world/Like a great black pit/And the vermin of the world/Inhabit it/And its morals aren't worth/What a pig could spit/And it goes by the name of London” (32). Nevertheless, he is not yet determined to seek revenge. Rather, he plans simply to seek out Mrs. Lovett and his old home to find out what has become of Lucy and Johanna. It is not until he finds out most of what the Judge has done to his wife and daughter that he reveals

specific plans to commit murder, and even then, his thirst for blood is driven purely by his love for his family. In his song “Epiphany,” one of the turning points of the musical, he has missed his chance to kill Judge Turpin and decides to “practice/On less honorable throats” (102). Even throughout this chaotic number, as Todd descends further into madness, he fixates during a few moments on the lost family that still motivates his actions: “And I’ll never see Johanna,/No, I’ll never hug my girl to me/...And my Lucy lies in ashes/And I’ll never see my girl again” (102). Even now, when the calm that has defined his character throughout the first act of the musical has left him, his motivations are still clear and his commitment to avenging the wrong done to his wife and daughter remains intact.

Sweeney Todd’s love may be more insistent than that of any other character, but he is not the only one Sondheim transforms into a lover. His Mrs. Lovett is in many ways similar to the Mrs. Lovett who appears in the original version of Sweeney Todd: she is hell-bent on profit, to the point that she justifies not only murder but cannibalism simply because “business needs a lift” (Sondheim and Wheeler 104). Though she commits none of the murders herself, her unconcerned attitude toward murder, dismemberment, and anthropophagy is sometimes even more unsettling than Todd’s vengeance and wrath. “But,” as Alfred Mollin writes, “Mrs. Lovett has a redeeming feature . . . Because of her love for Sweeney, she does not treat him as merely a means to an end. Her generosity to Sweeney is unrestrained” (412). She, like Todd himself, does terrible things in the name of her love; apart from her contribution to murder (the impetus for which is not really love), she deceives—or at least misleads—about Lucy’s death, setting Todd’s murderous plans into motion. Many of her actions are in service of her greed, but Mollin is right to point out that her love for Todd—unrequited though it may be—redeems her at least in some

ways, even as it condemns her. Just as Todd's desire for vengeance is understandable, Mrs. Lovett's love for Sweeney Todd despite his obsession with the past and his general indifference toward her is compelling, especially for an American audience interested in and accustomed to unrequited love narratives. Mrs. Lovett's treatment of Toby is endearing, as well; their duet, "Not While I'm Around," shows Toby's genuine love for Mrs. Lovett and her at least pseudo-maternal affection for Toby. But though Mrs. Lovett and Toby develop a close relationship throughout the course of the musical, she ultimately chooses Sweeney Todd over Toby. She locks Toby in the bakehouse alone with the dismembered corpses so that he doesn't escape and confront Todd, and she helps Todd search for Toby knowing that Todd will kill the boy when they find him. Perhaps in her deluded belief in Todd's returned affection for her, she assumes she will be able to persuade him not to murder Toby—such a misreading of Todd would fit Mrs. Lovett's character, and it would make her all the more sympathetic to an American audience.

Tobias Ragg is, in the original 1846 version of the story, abused by Todd, but he does enjoy the affection of his mother. Sondheim makes Tobias an orphan, abused by Pirelli and taken in by Todd and Mrs. Lovett. While Todd mostly ignores and occasionally frightens the boy, Mrs. Lovett develops a close, almost familial relationship with him. Toby has pure intentions to protect his mother figure, and it is only after the trauma of discovering that he has eaten human flesh and been living with murderers for weeks that he loses his mind and slits Todd's throat, either unaware of or unconcerned about Mrs. Lovett's death. Again, Sondheim transforms a character formerly driven by pure survival instinct into a young man (perhaps *very* young, depending upon the production) desperate for affection—enough so that he is willing to challenge a larger-than-life "demon" like Sweeney Todd in order to protect Mrs. Lovett.

Even Judge Turpin, the unqualified villain if the musical has one, is a lover, though he is motivated more by lustful infatuation than by romantic love. During a song often omitted from performances of Sondheim's musical (and in fact omitted from its original production), he peers at a half-dressed Johanna through a keyhole while whipping himself. Johanna makes it clear that she does not return his affection, and it is in large part his pursuit of Johanna that leads him to his death. The Judge is easily the most despicable villain in the story, rivalling the original 1846 version of the barber, and his death is a satisfying conclusion to Todd's murderous quest. Still, his crimes of coercion, rape, kidnapping, and apathetic corruption of the London legal system are too horrible on their own—somehow even more horrible than murder and cannibalism—without some kind of love to drive them. His love is impure and self-serving, but Sondheim emphasizes even in the Judge, who is a new addition to the story by Bond, an obsession with intimacy shared among all of the characters as well as the audiences.

The ostensible lovers in Sondheim's retelling are Anthony Hope and Johanna, who meet while Johanna is under the Judge's oppression. Their arc is different from the original story's love tale; while the 1846 Johanna's engagement to Mark Ingestrie is not encouraged by her family, it is not outright forbidden. Sondheim's Johanna, on the other hand, is at the mercy of the Judge; she is his ward and unable to marry Anthony until after Sweeney Todd kills him, removing the only significant obstacle to the couple's happiness. The duet scenes she shares with Anthony during the musical interrupt the dismal tone of the revenge story; their relationship is unsullied by murderous motives.

While Broadway, or the musical genre in general, is often—and rightfully—associated with love stories, *Sweeney Todd* responds more to a broad cultural trend than to a Broadway-

specific trend. While in past decades, Tony awards for Best Musical went to romantic classics like *Guys and Dolls*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Sound of Music*, the '70s saw more interest—both on Broadway and in film—in other kinds of stories, including coming-of-age tales, exciting adventure narratives, and goofy comedies. The love stories that did make it into the hearts of the American public now tended to include much messier plotlines with much less unambiguously “good” characters. *Company*, the Tony winner for Best Musical in 1971, has as its main character a man who is suspicious of love and marriage; he ultimately decides he wants a relationship of the kind each of his friends enjoys, but he does so while acknowledging the many pitfalls and complexities of love. *Annie Hall*, Best Picture winner of 1978, ends not with a classic happily-ever-after, but with a parting of ways. Popular culture in the '70s seemed to have moved on from straightforward romance plots, preferring complicated and difficult relationships that sometimes fail.

Sondheim wrote his *Sweeney Todd* musical for 1970s American audiences, and the changes he made to the characters, the plot, and the guiding themes reflect the interests of that culture, very different as it was from Victorian England. One driving impetus of change in 1960s and '70s America was second-wave feminism. Feminist publications like *The Feminist Press*, *Women's Studies Newsletter*, and *Ms.* magazine began circulating during the early 1970s (Eversley and Habell-Pallan 14). Anna Ward comments, “The 1970s saw a solidification of self-help and therapeutic approaches to sex and sexuality aimed at self-exploration and personal transformation. This solidification is particularly noticeable within the booming dating and sex advice literature market of the 1970s” (120). This literature and those who wrote it opposed the moralistic idea of “normal” sexual and romantic relationships and “idealized” couples and

instead focused on healthy, pleasurable, individualistic approaches. More broadly, Ward argues, “While none of these guides should be positioned as shining examples of feminist-inflected analysis, they do demonstrate the considerable impact of feminist discourse, including mirroring some of the tensions and debates within feminist communities” (133). The same is true (if to a lesser extent) of Sondheim’s musical.

These trends suggest that, by the 1970s, audiences demanded more of their love stories, more dimensional and representative characters with more complex and relatable motivations and more recognizable and realistic conflicts. Whereas the great romances up until the ’70s included the famous happily-ever-after, the popular literature of 1970 and beyond instead offered love stories that were more complicated and less superficially satisfying. While the romance plot in the original version of the Sweeney Todd narrative seems insignificant in comparison with the much more believable and exciting murder-mystery plot, Sondheim’s version manages to incorporate both elements effectively and, further, tie them inextricably together. Indeed, Todd’s motivation for murder in the first place, though it transforms quickly into something somewhat different, is a complicated and problematic love.

In the end, the only characters left standing are those who mirror most closely the original, flat lovers of the 1846 version. Anthony and Johanna fall in love at first sight, and though challenged by the lechery and cruelty of Judge Turpin, their romance is straightforward. While charming, and perhaps a necessary deviation from the dark tone Sondheim establishes and maintains elsewhere in the story, Johanna and Anthony’s relationship is not the main focus of the musical. Its simplicity makes it less interesting than the activities of Todd and Mrs. Lovett, or

even Judge Turpin. Still, the purity and simplicity of their romance is what allows them to survive, even if they are not the story's most memorable duo. Sondheim writes,

Everybody is obsessed by one thing: the judge with his lechery, the beadle with his authority, Mrs. Lovett with her greed, Sweeney with his revenge, the boy Tobias with a home, and the lovers with each other. Everybody wants one thing, they all clash, and there is a terrible collision. When the refuse clears, only two of them are left alive—the lovers. (14)

These themes that saturate the musical are new additions to the narrative, introduced by Bond and expanded upon by Sondheim. Each character in the musical is charming to American audiences because of his or her capacity for love and obsession. That all of the characters in Sondheim's narrative—but not in the original—share these qualities reveals the peculiarly American preoccupation with this powerful capacity for complex love. But it is not enough, it seems, to love another person or to pursue an obsession. Characters whose actions are motivated by immoral obsession or unrequited (because misplaced) love meet a far worse fate than those guided by genuine shared affection. Toby, the orphan assistant to Mrs. Lovett, technically survives; his love for Mrs. Lovett is real, but she does not sufficiently return his adoration. He aims his obsession at the wrong target, and by the end of the narrative, Toby has transformed into a killer. The lovers, however, have the least complicated arc in the story. Despite their comparatively uncomplicated story, it is because of this simple shared love that they are left alive. Anthony and Johanna survive, haunted perhaps, but free to leave the “City on Fire” and seek a better life. Their requited, romantic love is a way out of the cycle of corruption and murder in Victorian London, mirrored by the environment of Sondheim's production: 1970s New York City.

CHAPTER TWO
“A HOLE IN THE WORLD”: URBAN FILTH AND CORRUPTION FROM VICTORIAN
LONDON TO SONDHEIM’S NYC

Sondheim’s musical first introduced American audiences to the story of Sweeney Todd in New York City in the late 1970s. The narrative had until that point enjoyed great success over its century and a half of adaptation across genres and media. British audiences had accepted the story as an essential piece of English culture and, in some cases, as a piece of genuine British history. But that Sondheim identified Bond’s *Sweeney Todd*, a story with British roots and concerns and chock full of death, as a story that would resonate with American audiences is curious. Sondheim’s transformation of the chief characters in the narrative into lovers goes a long way toward reimagining the story for Americans, but even more telling is his emphasis on filth and death in Todd’s story. Where the musical’s creator considers *Sweeney Todd* to be a love story for the ages, Sondheim reveals that Hal Prince, the director of the first 1979 Broadway production, was informed by a somewhat different view of the narrative:

Hal firmly believes that Sweeney Todd is a story about how society makes you impotent, and impotence leads to rage, and rage leads to murder—and, in fact, to the breaking down of society. Fine. In order to make the point, he had to show the society in action. . . . And I’m a city boy myself; it’s easy for me to relate to. (11)

As a “city boy,” Sondheim would have been as accustomed to accumulated garbage, dirty streets, and disease-ridden pests as his New York audience. It is this urban relatability that allows Sondheim to transpose the narrative from a British theater into an American one and to transform the story from one about Victorian filth into one about American urban corruption. The

materiality of filth and bodily decay in both urban locations should be taken literally. Audiences of both Victorian and late-twentieth-century settings would relate uncomfortably to the depictions in the story of a filthy city overrun with garbage, sewage, death, and disease. But while both versions of the story of Sweeney Todd emphasize material urban filth as a literal challenge to their city-dwelling audiences, Sondheim's transformation of the narrative foregrounds more insistently the figurative implications of that filth. Sondheim leverages his New York City audience's experiences of material filth so as to highlight the representation of social issues such as the treatment of the poor and the mentally ill, as well as the systemic problems of corruption in the judicial system.

Both versions take place in Victorian London, a setting famously filthy. Michelle Allen explains, "Until the mid-nineteenth century, [domestic waste] was generally collected in cesspools (enclosed pits dug into the ground) which were periodically emptied by manual labor" (383). This common contact with sewage in Victorian London is implied during Toby's introductory number in Sondheim's musical, during which he sings about his master Pirelli's "miracle elixir." As Toby sings, Todd and Mrs. Lovett loudly comment on the smell of the elixir, saying that they "must be standing near an open trench" (55). They refer to these very common cesspools, filled with sewage. While certainly unpleasant, and a clear metaphor in *Sweeney Todd* for far more insidious kinds of filth, these trenches would have been familiar to Victorian Londoners as a part of everyday life. No one is particularly surprised by the proximity of waste in this number, though certainly no one wants to pay Pirelli for "an arrant fraud, concocted from piss and ink" (59). But while Londoners in the nineteenth century had accepted cesspools as a part of their lives, these "open trenches" did cause significant problems for city dwellers. Allen

points out that “the noxious fumes generated by decomposing refuse could, and often did, cause instantaneous death by asphyxiation” (384). With filth in Victorian London posing such a physical danger, it is little wonder that the story of a neighborhood murderer feels natural in this setting.

Clearly, domestic waste, dirt, and grime were a significant part of everyday life in Sweeney Todd’s urban setting. The material implications of such filth are, of course, infectious disease and death, which merely continues the cycle of potential infection. But in addition to beginning to respond to the problems of plumbing, London in the nineteenth century was experiencing a great deal of industrialization and growth, but also crime. The city had long been the cultural hub of Great Britain, but with advances in technology and medicine, larger populations were more sustainable (leading, of course, to the accumulation of filth that created so many problems). Londoners realized the new potential for disaster, both in terms of material filth and cultural shifts. Robert Mack points out,

If the wealth of the world was to make its way up the Thames estuary and into the great global emporium of London, the disquieting and increasingly visible presence of cultural and racial “invasion” reminded citizens of the metropolis that they were not only importing the material wealth of nations into their own environments, but opening themselves up to the concomitant importation of alien ideas, habits, languages, manners, faiths and modes of social and domestic organization. (63)

This process doubtless engendered great distrust of strangers and neighbors alike among Londoners in the nineteenth century. Not only were the streets of their urban home infected by waste and pests, their culture was likewise “infected” by imported ideologies and behaviors. In response to a rising crime rate, such distrust is understandable, especially given the horrors occurring beneath the feet of fictional Londoners in the story of Sweeney Todd. Real Londoners

felt the weight of their urban challenges, material and figurative, and *The String of Pearls*, the popular novel that first told Sweeney Todd's story, responds to those challenges.

Lloyd's original novel places heavy emphasis on the geography of London, both as a cultural setting and a material one. A map of London has frequently appeared in reprinted editions, and even the medium of the original publication, the periodical penny newspaper, was a staple of London culture. Fleet Street, where Todd keeps his shop, was—and is—famous for its relationship to the publishing industry as well as its sordid history of crime. The bells of St. Dunstan's Church are almost their own character in the novel, marking time and providing convenient distractions for Tobias and Todd's other pursuers. The Bow Street runners, recently established at the time of the novel's publication, appear, as do highwaymen and pickpockets, hugely popular at the time as protagonists of the penny bloods. Fogg's asylum represents typical treatment of the mentally ill in London, while Mrs. Lovett's meat pie shop serves law students the popular fare of Victorian London.

Focusing more on figurative than literal filth, *The String of Pearls* exploits the public's concerns about urban spaces; as cities in the nineteenth century rapidly grew, people got anxious about crowds, about sustainable development, and about nature. As Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones point out, "The legend plays on our continued wariness of the city as a place where identities become disturbingly changeable, where loved ones can be 'lost'—or lose themselves—and where the concentration of people leads to arbitrary choices (to visit one barber's shop rather than another) with potentially deadly consequences" (6). These consequences in Lloyd's novel are gruesome not only for the victims but for the citizenry as a whole. The middle-class lawyers, for example, who ravenously consume Mrs. Lovett's flesh pies, face their consequences at the

end of the narrative when the truth becomes clear and the patrons of the pie shop realize what they have been eating.

Given the state of New York City at the time *Sweeney Todd* first appeared on Broadway, the popularity of Todd's story and its London backdrop is not so surprising. Aleksei Grinenko points out that "the 1970s was a period of urban blight for New York City, characterized by a serious slump in the city's economy and a surge in its crime rate" (236). One way in which this "blight" manifested in Manhattan was widespread material filth. Just as both living and dead bodies were sources of major problems in Victorian London, bodies cause some of the biggest problems encountered by Sondheim's New York audience as well. The products of bodily functions are immediately evoked in the musical, and while Todd's opening song clearly possesses a figurative dimension, he does mean that his city is "filled with people / Who are filled with shit" (33), literally as well as figuratively.

The filth of the city in the '70s is well documented, as is the political rhetoric and social policy designed to improve conditions in the decades following. Lucius Riccio, Joseph Miller, and Ann Litke describe the uncleanliness of the streets during the period in which *Sweeney Todd* first became popular:

New York City, never known as a clean place, had become substantially dirtier than it was prior to the fiscal crisis of the mid-70s. . . . the city went from having 72 percent of its streets acceptably clean in 1976 to 55.7 percent in 1979. In 1980, a tugboat strike which greatly affected our waste disposal operation suppressed the ratings even further to an all time low of 53 percent. (84)

Of course, like London, some parts of the city were cleaner than others, both materially and figuratively. Riccio, Miller, and Litke explain why some neighborhoods responded more lastingly to cleaning efforts than others:

If you put a cleaner in a clean area such as Staten Island or eastern Queens and that cleaner does a good job cleaning a street, that street will probably remain clean for two weeks. If you put a cleaner in midtown Manhattan or the Wall Street area, which has a much higher amount of pedestrian traffic, and that cleaner does a good job cleaning a street, that street might remain clean for only two hours. Even though he's picked up more litter, the cleaner's effectiveness in keeping the streets clean is limited by the higher litter rate. (86)

But just as some parts of the urban space were more difficult to clean physically, some places tended to foil law enforcement and criminal justice efforts as well. Grinenko points out,

During this bleak era, the area in and around Times Square and, in particular, Forty-Second Street was notorious for its profusion of sex trade, adult entertainment, drug dealing, and other transgressive practices. The social ecology of this neighborhood, continued with the theater district, was perceived by many as threatening and pathological. (236)

In many ways, theater-goers were uniquely positioned to observe the effects of material and cultural filth, as they were the relatively wealthier targets of petty crime in a particularly dirty part of the city. Like Todd's Victorian London, Manhattan had a considerable disparity between the "cleanest" and the "filthiest" parts of the urban landscape, and like nineteenth-century Londoners, New Yorkers felt those differences in their social policies and their justice systems.

Such similarities between the two cities make Victorian London a fitting backdrop for a story viewed by residents of New York City. Even a modern city like Sondheim's Manhattan has its challenges when it comes to city planning and plumbing. A city as large as New York in the '70s has to find some way to dispose of massive quantities of waste and garbage. And while no literal demon barber wandered in their midst, New Yorkers also understood the crime and corruption the story highlights through its presentation of filth. For Sondheim's audience, the "hole in the world" might be their very own Big Apple just as easily as it might be London.

The material and metaphoric filth in the Sweeney Todd story is a key element in both the original and the American adaptation. Indeed, it is in this aspect that Sondheim's musical is the most similar to its Victorian predecessor. Sondheim's 1979 version, despite being adapted by and for twentieth-century Americans, maintains the specific geography of the original story. Sweeney Todd is, after all, the demon barber of *Fleet Street*, not lower Manhattan. The musical's iron labyrinth manages not only to represent a twisted and corrupt city but specifically evokes the startling urbanization and, in many cases, squalor of Victorian London.

Several songs in the musical point to this overwhelming material filth. Among them is "The Worst Pies in London," the song that introduces one of the central characters in the story. When Todd first meets Mrs. Lovett, she sings to him about the dismal quality of the meat pies she is—unsuccessfully—peddling. Grinenko argues that "the expansion of attention paid to the daily march of material pollution in this song also showcases the priorities of scale in the musical's inflections of urban filth. Implicit in the genesis of this and other unsanitary sequences in the show is a creative process that mines the author's real or imaginary experiences of city living" (236). Mrs. Lovett's experience in the musical is very different from the novel version, in which the meat pie shop flourishes from the beginning. In contrast, Sondheim's Mrs. Lovett initially struggles to keep her business afloat as she crafts her moldy pies from third-rate meat products and other vermin-infested ingredients. "No wonder," she says of her wholly unappetizing offerings before they are rejuvenated with human flesh, "With the price of meat / What it is" (35). Unable, like many Londoners of the time, to afford premium ingredients like meat, Mrs. Lovett's shop is in financial distress, contributing further to its grungy state and to the cycle of revolting products made from revolting ingredients. She is aware of this, of course,

openly admitting to Todd that her food is “disgusting” and “all greasy and gritty” (36). When she offers a pie to him, the stage directions dictate, “*She blows the last dust off the pie as she brings it to him*” (35). Frequently during her introductory number, she swats at unseen insects or pests with her rolling pin or even her hand, and finally, noticing that Todd is unable to swallow the pie, she encourages him to “spit it out, dear. Go on. On the floor. There’s worse things than that down there” (37).

These realities represented in the narrative signify the preoccupations of Sondheim’s 1970s audience, as well as the succeeding ones. Poore and Jones articulate this very thing: “Sondheim’s vision of a society hurtling towards its own destruction—a city on fire, with rats in the streets, a city literally consuming itself—is one with which, via our modern addiction to burning finite fossil fuels and producing excess waste, we can sharply identify on a much grander scale” (8). Although the original narrative’s focus on filth produces a similar effect, Sondheim’s transformation of the narrative opens new doors through which to explore this relationship between the two major cities, between their experiences of material filth as well as of corruption. Grinenko points out that in Sondheim’s version, waste matter “has the common utility of providing a phenomenological baseline for social definitions of what is experienced as disgusting and threatening” (242).

In *Sweeney Todd*, material filth and garbage symbolize moral corruption. In the original story, Sweeney Todd himself is corrupted by his avarice and his disregard for human life. Hiding the bodies beneath the church highlights both the general hypocrisy many working-class Londoners felt was embodied by the clergy—Mr. Lupin in the novel—and the moral depravity of Todd’s activities. The musical underscores this symbolic relationship much more insistently;

Sondheim transposes the story into modern Manhattan and, in doing so, transplants the social commentary so as to target the various government officials of his own time and place. Most obviously in light of the material filth on which his narrative lingers, he invokes those organizations in charge of waste disposal and sanitation. But more significant for Sondheim is his focus on law enforcement and criminal justice in Todd's Victorian London. Given that these elements are not present in the original version of the narrative, it is clear that Sondheim's commentary is directed much more toward his own New York City justice system than it is to the Victorian London counterpart. Focusing on this commentary, Grinenko argues,

Commenting on unjust power relations implicit in a system that seeks to punish/reform its criminals and restrain/cure its mentally ill by keeping them in jails and asylums, *Sweeney Todd* constructs a tense dialectic between incarceration and release and extends its fate beyond the fate of the eponymous hero, a wrongly accused convict at large, to the whole population of the onstage cityscape. (241)

Sondheim's focus on filth symbolizes the treatment of these criminal and mentally ill characters, as well as other poor and disenfranchised dwellers of both his onstage setting and real-life New York.

The disparity of wealth in the urban space is a theme of both versions of the narrative. The poor play an important role both for the original novelist and for Sondheim. In the original, Mrs. Lovett's employee is always coerced into working or slaving for her and is motivated by the promise of satiating extreme hunger. He unknowingly engages in cannibalism while working in Mrs. Lovett's bakehouse dungeon, and the setting is eerie and unsettling even before the truth behind the meat pies is revealed. But Mark Ingestrie, aside from Tobias and his mother, is the only character in the original novel to represent the London poor. In Sondheim's version, however, many critics have pointed out the critique of capitalism at work. In outing the

fraudulent barber, for example, Todd reveals Pirelli's abuse of his customers' good faith to acquire both money and notoriety.

Sondheim's visual presentation of the poor further differentiate them from the wealthy, like Pirelli and the Judge. The poor characters are visibly dirty, and they are dogged by the kind of vermin and filth that invoke the possibility of sickness and disease, which kill people more quickly in urban areas. The fictional poor and homeless, such as the Beggar Woman and the inmates of the asylum, like the numerous nonfictional homeless of New York City, are even more susceptible to such hardships. The impoverished inhabitants of London play only a very minor role in the original 1846 novel, but in Sondheim's musical, even Mrs. Lovett starts out in dire straits financially. While the disease with which she is afflicted is of a moral nature rather than a physical one, the vermin that surround her when she first appears onstage clearly symbolize the potential for disease. In the end, her disease—greed—is what leads to her death.

Certainly, the frank representation of the mentally ill is an entirely Sondheimian addition. While the original novel does include a chapter devoted to the inmates of Fogg's asylum, these inmates are all implied to be perfectly in control of their mental faculties; the greed of their families and Fogg is what keeps them incarcerated. The Beggar Woman, an invention of Bond but an innovation of Sondheim, is much like these inmates before Sondheim's transformation; in Bond's version she is treated as mad, but she does not present this way. By contrast, Sondheim's Beggar Woman is physically dirty throughout the musical, a state that highlights her position as social refuse. By the end of the musical, her identity as Todd's presumed-dead wife is revealed. Mrs. Lovett confesses that in her grief, Lucy has taken poison and lost, rather than her life as intended, her mind. Presumably ever since this incident, she has wandered the streets. Each time

she appears onstage, her dialogue is nonlinear and confusing, she is sexually provocative, and the other characters, while unsurprised to see her, avoid her. As Grinenko points out, “By the time of *Sweeney Todd*’s premiere, the homeless mad had become a staple of the cultural imaginary of New York City” (238); then by the time the audience learns the Beggar Woman’s tragic story, they already identify her as a part of a real urban backdrop with which they are already familiar. The inmates of the asylum where Johanna is confined mirror this sympathetic process. By allowing the London mad to be associated with Johanna, so clearly wrongly imprisoned and mistreated, Sondheim brings their unjust circumstances to the foreground as well.

Dysfunction and deviance coalesce in Sondheim’s comical portrayal of Londoners happily and ignorantly consuming their neighbors. Toby is the only character whose cannibalism reads as horrifying. For the rest of the company, it is, quite the opposite, funny. Act One ends after the song “A Little Priest,” in which Mrs. Lovett suggests to Todd the enterprise of cooking his murder victims in her pies. The upbeat number sees the two dreary characters, jumping around the stage, imagining a menu full of puns relating to their victim’s profession. The politician pie, for example, would be “oily,” while the actor would be “overdone” (111). When Act Two opens, Mrs. Lovett’s shop is swarming with customers (as it is in the novel) eager for a taste of her pies, the secret of which, she says, is “all to do with herbs” (147). A customer ascends the stairs to Todd’s barbershop, where the clients are murdered for pie fillings, and Mrs. Lovett smiles up at him while her own customers clamber around the pie shop eating the meat pastries until they are sold out. This moment in particular underscores the blind consumerism and self-service Sondheim—but not Lloyd and the original novelist—uses Todd’s story to critique. Sondheim employs humor to make the material reality of consuming corpses accessible

and even palatable to audiences and is therefore able to tell those audiences a story about a kind of moral depravity very closely related to their own everyday surroundings.

In the original version, filth serves to symbolize the depravity of Todd and his accomplice, not that of the law enforcement officials in the story. The origin of the stench in St. Dunstan's Church is Todd's decomposing victims, which are discovered by the magistrate. Though Todd's story in the novel is interesting enough to allow him to be the focal point, the magistrate (as well as Mark, Johanna, Tobias, and those who assist the magistrate) is the hero of the story. But in almost every aspect of the musical, filth and corruption go hand in hand. Most significantly, Sondheim leverages his audience's experiences of material filth in Manhattan to highlight the corruption of Judge Turpin and the London judicial system in opposition to Todd, commenting on the same corruption in American judicial systems. It is only in Sondheim's musical that Sweeney Todd's actions respond to these representations of corruption. Todd's hiding the corpses in the original novel serves to underscore the hypocrisy of the church, but ultimately, the church—and the justice system in London—wins. Todd is found out and put to death, and the church can return to its usual business. In Sondheim's retelling, while Toby does stop Todd's nefarious activities, Todd is not caught by the corrupt justice system in his London; rather, he achieves his goal of murdering Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford and he never stands trial.

The materiality of human waste in the Sweeney Todd story is, as Louise Creechan points out,

Not as central to the narrative as are the pies, but their inclusion offers an insight into the depths of depravity under the forces of capitalism. Indeed, these further examples of the exchange of human products prevent the actions of Todd and Lovett from being dismissed as the actions of two extremists. Their actions may be severe, but they are not

that far removed from the other exchanges of human body parts and fluids that are going on around them. (108)

These physical exchanges point to a broad moral depravity on which the original novelist comments less than Sondheim does. Sondheim's version is full of characters whose degeneracy is symbolized by the material filth that surrounds them. Judge Turpin, for example, comes to Todd's tonsorial parlor after being told by the Beadle,

You're looking less than your best, my lord
There's powder upon your vest, my lord
And stubble upon your cheek. (86)

The Judge's shaggy state symbolizes, rather than social disenfranchisement or poverty, his moral depravity and corruption as a major actor in the London judicial system.

Sondheim's focus on corruption allows him to present Todd not as a straightforward villain, as he is in the original novel, but as a social servant. It is significant that when Judge Turpin realizes that he is too scruffy to tempt Johanna, he turns to Sweeney Todd to correct this material problem. Todd's ability to fix this problem highlights his ability to fix the problem of the Judge's moral corruption as well. Similarly, the rodents and insects that infest Mrs. Lovett's shop early on symbolize the "vermin of the world" that Todd says inhabit London, and their disappearance in the second act of the musical is significant. After the problem of Todd's victims is mitigated by grinding the corpses into meat and serving them to enthusiastic customers, the bugs no longer inhabit the pie shop. This highlights the fact that Todd is, in a way, performing a public service. The literal vermin represent, on one hand, the physical bodies of London's population and the material filth they create and, on the other hand, the depravity and corruption of their behavior. Todd's interventions attend to the actual problems represented by the bugs as well as the figurative problems they symbolize.

The London that Sweeney Todd inhabits in Sondheim's musical is filthy, both literally and metaphorically. Todd recognizes this immediately and quickly plots to address its literal troubles as well as its figurative ones. In this way, Sondheim's symbolic setting is very similar to Frank Miller's Gotham, and his antihero Sweeney Todd foreshadows some of the essential characteristics of America's most beloved vigilante, Batman.

CHAPTER THREE

“CITY ON FIRE”: LONDON, GOTHAM, AND THE AMERICAN VIGILANTE HERO

If Victorian London is an appropriate backdrop for a story viewed by late-twentieth-century New Yorkers because of the parallel challenges with sanitation faced by each city, just as significant is the fact that the settings shared deeper, more figurative, moral challenges as well. Despite (and in some cases because of) advances in technology, infrastructure, medicine, and public policy, New York in the 1970s still experienced high incidences of crime, just as London had over a hundred years before. A century of work devoted to addressing these social problems had improved conditions, but Americans remained frustrated as the problems were by no means entirely solved. Another city, fictional but representative of the urban spaces with which the American audience of Sondheim’s musical would have been familiar, also shares these challenges. Gotham City, the urban home of Detective Comics’s iconic twentieth-century character Batman, is in every chapter and adaptation of Batman’s story plagued with crime and corruption. Just like London and New York, Gotham is loved for its uniqueness but hated for its high crime rate, and just like London in *Sweeney Todd*, it is home to a questionable “hero” who takes justice into his own hands. Though the moral codes the characters follow are wildly different from each other, they both act as urban vigilantes, seeking to rid their cities of its most deplorable criminals. Sweeney Todd in Sondheim’s reimagining is a sort of proto-Batman figure, responding to American storytelling trends that favor resourceful problem solving in the heroes of its popular tales.

As I have argued above, material filth in 1970s New York City, while significant in its own right, also serves to represent the ethical corruption of its governing bodies. Louise Creechan cites several examples of social unrest in the United States during the 1970s that contributed to *Sweeney Todd*'s cultural moment, “such as the loss of the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Left, and various radical movements in feminism and civil rights—in addition to a period of high unemployment, economic instability and recession following the stock market crash of 1973-74” (104). Just as the foul-smelling smoke coming from Mrs. Lovett’s bakehouse represents the murderous and anthropophagic activities of Todd and Lovett, New York City garbage represented inefficient city government and, in turn, war, corruption, and death.

Even in the face of such a bleak social state, or perhaps because of it, Americans tend to favor optimism in their fiction, rarely enjoying unresolved tragedy. Since at least the 1950s, the stories that have found popularity with American audiences have tended to resist tragedy. Popular films and Broadway musicals of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, *The Sound of Music*, *Guys and Dolls*, *My Fair Lady*, *Oliver!*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, all end happily, or at least optimistically, with the protagonists finding love, happiness, success, freedom, or peace by the story’s conclusion. Even *Titanic*, a retelling of a famously tragic historical event, manages to spin the story to focus on a romance between two characters, and it can therefore offer a much less tragic conclusion at least for one character. Some of the most popular American stories in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been about heroes: dystopian or post-apocalyptic tales of a prophesied savior figure (*The Matrix*, *Terminator*, *Star Wars*), stories about real “heroic” social institutions like the military or the police or fire department (*World Trade Center*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*,

300, *Glory*), stories about sports heroes (*Miracle*, *Remember the Titans*, *Friday Night Lights*), and, of course, superhero narratives. Even if these stories do not end happily for the protagonists, their actions imply a better future for their communities or societies at large.

Teachers have especially noticed this American impatience with tragedy. Geraldine Vale reports that her students find “a fundamental optimism in such superficially pessimistic works as Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*” (22), and Thomas Elliott argues that “the ideas of Progress and Optimism . . . have been at the core of American value systems in various and complex ways for well over two-hundred years” (121). Vale gives several examples from American fiction, arguing that even the tragic mode often serves in American literature to illuminate much more optimistic views. For example, Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, Vale argues,

is depressing; yet it has remained continuously in print since its re-issue in 1922. The opportunity for teaching lies in helping the students to see that although the plot is depressing, the underlying theme is not; Wharton tells a story of a series of avoidable mistakes made by the protagonist that bring him unending suffering but that cannot defeat his equally persistent optimism. (20)

American scholars have noted this resistance to tragedy in numerous fields. Though she considers the trend a less positive one than others, Cornelia Cannon notes that Americans have long tended to believe wholeheartedly, even obstinately, that progress in America is inevitable.

She points out,

We brag about tall steeples, square feet of cement sidewalk, maximums and minimums in temperature, rapidity of railroad construction, plentiful supply of cheap labor, high wages to grave diggers, number of hogs per unit of population, absence of snow, the dryness or rain, number of women blacksmiths in the country, acres of pine turned annually into toothpicks, and we call this orgy of optimism 100% Americanism! (448)

This steadfast faith in progress and stubborn optimism also manifests in American fiction. As we have seen, many of the American films that have won awards or earned exceptionally large

amounts of money in the box office during the past century confirm this preference; even when their stories are tragic, Americans look for a glimmer of hope, however small.

Difficult though it may be to argue that Sondheim's musical offers a happy ending, classifying *Sweeney Todd* as a tragedy is not so easy either. It owes at least a part of its success to its departure from the Broadway norm. Scott Freer points out, "Conventional utopian musicals express themes of conformity, but Sondheim wanted to convey the idea that nonconformity in society is 'a fairly common theme' too" (67). Nonconformity is also a popular American theme, if examples such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, the Rebel Alliance of the *Star Wars* franchise, punk rock music, the American Revolution, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott are any indication. But even beyond this theme, Sondheim is committed to this notion of universality. Reflecting on the musical's ambiguous genre classification, he explains,

Sweeney Todd, which after all is a melodrama about revenge, poses a problem for a lot of people who refuse to admit to themselves that they have a capacity for vengeance, but I think it's a universal trait. I didn't see any reason why we couldn't do what Christopher Bond had done, which is to make Sweeney a tragic hero instead of a villain, because there is something of Sweeney in all of us, I believe. (10)

This focus drove Sondheim's decision to emphasize love as a motivator for all of the characters in *Sweeney Todd*. But as much as love is a universal trait, so is this capacity for vengeance.

While audiences are not meant to approve of Todd's methods for seeking revenge on Judge Turpin and the justice system of London, neither are they meant to condemn his desire for vengeance. Todd may not be quite the hero Batman is, but he is also not the villain of his story. His ambiguous moral position makes his story difficult to classify absolutely as a tragedy. Citing the humor in the story as evidence, Sondheim thinks of the story as a melodrama, but this term is still not altogether satisfying. In the end, Sondheim and Prince decided to call *Sweeney Todd* "a

musical thriller,” knowing that American audiences in the 1970s would be less likely to be interested in a melodrama, let alone a true tragedy.

This general distaste for tragedy, combined with the preference for unconventional stories, has given Americans an obsession with solutions, or with turning unsolvable problems into solvable ones. *Sweeney Todd*, as much as it is a story about revenge and murder, is also a story about rectifying situations that seem hopeless; it is about solving problems. The narrative shares this trait with countless beloved American stories. Americans love an underdog, and more significantly, they have genuine faith that an underdog can overcome the odds and win. This faith carries over from fiction into social institutions and political rhetoric, and the United States therefore has a powerful history of achieving its goals, from the war for independence to the moon landing. Still, dissent regarding how to solve America’s problems has been common since the beginning.

While the United States as its own nation achieved independence through a violent war with the British Empire, popular opinion regarding violence as a social and political tool has long been conflicted. Cannon, for instance, remarks on the optimism of American culture and, in particular, its more negative ramifications; she writes, “As a nation we take such delight in ourselves and our manifest destiny that we strike the uninitiated of other lands as a new species of the genus homo” (442). Acts of violence are necessary, perhaps, to protect citizens and defeat enemies, but the moral questions, such as who is to be trusted with dangerous resources and what consequences are acceptable, are not always so easy to dismiss. The 1960s and ’70s saw a particularly vehement opposition to violence and war, but this was certainly not the first time that such dissent had arisen. Often, public opinion clashes with official policy or legislative action,

and citizens are left feeling helpless against an oppressive, or else equally impotent, government or justice system.

In many ways, the story of Sweeney Todd follows naturally from the anxieties of its time. *Sweeney Todd*'s Broadway debut in 1979 came not long after the end of the bleak and costly Vietnam War, during a time when the American public was particularly ready for a new story that resisted the tragic mode. The half-century leading up to the musical's debut had been gruesome and bloody in general, unprecedentedly so. The resulting cultural anxieties would manifest in the fiction of the latter half of the century, and *Sweeney Todd* is no exception. As we have seen, Sondheim remolds *Sweeney Todd* into a complex web of love stories, but one that is able to comment on the public health care and maintenance of a classic American city. Further, Sondheim's musical pits a middle-class business owner, Todd, against a corrupt judge, an unambiguous symbol for the degeneracy many Americans saw in their authoritative institutions during the twentieth century.

That Sweeney Todd is performing a kind of community service in ridding London of such immoral figures as Judge Turpin, Beadle Bamford, and Pirelli is not difficult to argue. But because his revenge against the judge and his defense against Pirelli serve his deeper belief in the moral corruption of London, Todd's civic service is rooted in his desire to "clean up" the streets of his home city. In short, Todd is a vigilante, and his actions are more than just accidentally helpful to his community. An Internet search to define the word "vigilantism" yields not only several definitions that might accurately describe Sweeney Todd's actions but also images of some of America's best loved fictional characters. To explore these aspects of Sweeney Todd and his story, it is important to understand the cultural impact of those popular characters who

espouse such values and their own narratives throughout the twentieth century in the United States.

In response to the tension of the twentieth century in the same way as the musical *Sweeney Todd*, the comic book heroes of the twentieth century were born. The likes of Superman, Wolverine, the Hulk, and Spider-Man were enormously popular with American readers for their superhuman abilities and otherworldly adventures. But one of the most beloved, widely read, and frequently appearing superheroes is not “super” at all, but instead an ordinary man who uses his combat skills (and his considerable fortune) to take the law into his own hands. Batman, though highly trained and heavily armed, has no extraterrestrial abilities, beneficial genetic mutations, or fortuitous radioactive side effects. Given sufficient time, training, and funds, any American might imagine himself or herself in the shoes of the Dark Knight. In fact, this kind of emulation happens regularly in the Batman universe; in Frank Miller’s 1986 miniseries *The Dark Knight Returns*, not only is Batman’s sidekick replaced by a self-declared Robin, the members of the disbanded Mutant gang begin to dress and fight like Batman, in the name of fighting crime as he does.

Though Batman certainly fights his fair share of traditionally “evil” villains, a major source of the conflict in *The Dark Knight Returns* is public opinion. The citizens—and perhaps more pertinently the law enforcement officials—of Gotham have very mixed feelings about the Dark Knight. News segments repeatedly feature public debates on the hot topic of Batman’s vigilante actions, and the opposition is at least as vocal as the support. Although Batman’s actions do often bring violent criminals to justice, the collateral damage of his vigilantism is significant. He muses frequently on the number of people who have died because of his failures,

but even when he succeeds, roads, buildings, vehicles, and equipment are often damaged or destroyed, and sometimes people—both criminal lackeys and innocent bystanders—are injured or even killed. Ironically, it is often advocates and even psychiatrists responsible for releasing such villains as the Joker and Two-Face back into the Gotham public who most vehemently condemn Batman. But it is not always those with questionable judgment who oppose him. In the final installment of the series, Batman fights regular police and SWAT officers, and he even fights Superman, a famously upstanding hero. Because of this moral gray area in which Batman works, he has no shortage of enemies, both on the streets of Gotham and in its courthouses. One doctor goes so far as to call him a “Social fascist” (33), suggesting that his refusal to trust the justice system in Gotham reveals his sense of his own essential superiority.

In some moments, this accusation seems highly plausible. Batman behaves with disregard for the law, always operating under the belief that his ethical judgment is morally superior to that of Gotham’s finest. Sweeney Todd works under a similar belief in his own superiority. In his manic song “Epiphany,” he sings to Mrs. Lovett, “We all deserve to die” (101). Given his assertion in a previous number that in general London’s “morals aren’t worth / What a pig could spit” (32), this outlook is not surprising. But Todd clearly considers himself above the rabble in some ways. He further explains his assertion in “Epiphany”: “We all deserve to die. Even you, Mrs. Lovett, even I . . . Because the lives of the wicked should be – made brief. For the rest of us, death / Would be a relief” (101). His inclusive pronoun suggests that he considers himself among “the rest,” those who are not wicked, who do not have their feet in the faces of others. His crime, as Mrs. Lovett confirms, is “foolishness,” something he considers egregious, as it results in his wife’s abduction and death, but he blames the lecherous Judge Turpin—and his henchman

Beadle Bamford—far more than he blames himself, especially after “Epiphany.” The company also establishes Todd’s unique status in the title number, saying, “He trod a path that few have trod” (23) and “Sweeney heard music that nobody heard” (25). If he is not superior to *all* of his victims, then at least his ability and readiness to pass moral judgments and his willingness to forego his own “relief” in order to facilitate theirs place him in a position of superiority in his own mind.

The illuminating similarities between a crazed, cannibalistic murderer and a principled billionaire vigilante would seem to end here. If Todd and Batman are equally self-authoritative, morally, Todd is poor while Batman is rich, Todd murders a slew of his neighbors while Batman scrupulously refuses to kill, and Todd enlists an even less moral accomplice while Batman surrounds himself with voices of reason. But the stories are both complex enough to resist such binaries. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman is obsessed with the knowledge that his actions have caused many deaths, whether he has been directly responsible or not. By the end of the story, he is a fugitive wanted for numerous crimes, including child endangerment and—after a climactic battle with the Joker—murder. His insistence on working outside the rules of Gotham’s police, and in many cases in direct opposition to their efforts, frequently puts him into situations of questionable morality. On the other hand, Sweeney Todd is not quite the cold-blooded killer he seems. Alfred Mollin calls Todd a “radically moral mass murderer” (410), and while he certainly is a mass murderer, his morality is also difficult to question. Though, like Batman’s, that morality does not quite match up with that of his society and government, his actions are motivated at first by love, as we saw in Chapter One, but eventually by a broader sense of justice.

Though their stories have very different endings, the characters are curiously alike in many ways, both superficial and significant. In both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Batman and Todd, respectively, return to a crime-ridden and corrupt city after a long absence. Batman has “retired” from crime-fighting ten years prior to the opening of *The Dark Knight Returns*, but he soon emerges from his retirement to address new (and old) threats to Gotham. Todd has escaped from imprisonment in Australia for a crime he did not commit, and he sails back to London on the ship that rescued him. Both characters are widely disliked but respected for their skills. Batman is hated by many for his extreme methods, but many citizens, as well as Commissioner Gordon, acknowledge his ability to subdue criminals more effectively and certainly more quickly than the police sometimes can. Todd is off-putting due to his absent-mindedness and general misanthropy, but his skill with a razor is respected throughout London. Both Batman and Sweeney Todd assume alter-egos or aliases, as they both display a duality in their personalities. Bruce Wayne is in many ways an entirely different person from Batman, and Sweeney Todd insists to Mrs. Lovett after she recognizes him that he is no longer Benjamin Barker. At the end of their stories, their original identities are revealed. Batman stages his death, disclosing to Gotham that the famous billionaire Bruce Wayne has been the Dark Knight all along. Judge Turpin’s final words recognize Todd as the same Benjamin Barker he transported so many years ago, and Todd verbally confirms this. For both characters, this alter-ego is more than a secret identity; it is a vengeful spirit each is unable—or unwilling—to ignore or suppress.

This spirit of vengeance and obsession with justice are the most significant traits that Batman and Sweeney Todd share. Bruce Wayne’s parents were murdered by petty criminals

when he was young, and now in adulthood he (as Batman) fights in Gotham the criminals who symbolize that early trauma. In the same way, while Todd is single-mindedly focused on his revenge on Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford prior to his “Epiphany,” he quickly broadens his scope and turns to murdering any citizen of London, each of whom represents or is complicit in the system that killed his wife and wrongly transported him to Australia. Very much in keeping with the American way, a major motivation for both characters is their compulsive desire to take problems belonging not just to themselves but to their larger societies into their own hands and find solutions to them. In Batman’s case, resourcefulness and, by his own admission, a great deal of luck help him to defeat the formidable Mutant leader, a problem made obvious by his violent tactics, his quest for dominion over Gotham, and his threats to “rip the meat from [Batman’s] bones and suck them dry” and “eat his heart and drag his body through the street” (35), as well as his threats toward Commissioner Gordon. The Joker’s mass murder on the set of a talk show sets him up as a menace to Gotham as well, and Batman defeats him. Finally, the government calls Superman in to neutralize Batman, and this fight calls the morality of both characters—and the social institutions and philosophical positions they represent—into question.

Sweeney Todd’s villains are less straightforwardly evil than Batman’s villains tend to be, but he too solves problems not just for himself but for his community. As we have seen, filth in the musical stands for the corruption of the justice system in London, embodied most clearly in the well-respected Judge Turpin, who regularly sentences starving children to death for stealing food but who sends the innocent Barker to a prison colony for life in order to steal Barker’s wife. His lechery extends to Johanna, the teenaged girl he has raised as his daughter but whom he resolves to marry (a plot detail that offends the modern American audience much more than it

would have the original version's Victorian audience). Though Todd is more than willing to murder Turpin solely for revenge, he is also able to use Turpin as justification to kill for other motives as well, since Turpin does equal a wider social problem. In declaring a personal war on Judge Turpin, Todd is declaring war on the system Turpin represents, though he does not seem to comprehend this fully until "Epiphany."

Todd's initial encounter with Pirelli is one example of this social vigilantism. Pirelli is a travelling barber who claims to have used his superlative skill to provide services to kings and even the Pope, and he leverages this manufactured credibility to sell his elixir. Tobias sings about the medicinal properties of the elixir, which supposedly stimulates hair growth, but Todd convinces the crowd that the elixir is an "arrant fraud" (59) and that Pirelli is swindling his customers. This accusation provokes Pirelli into challenging Todd to a duel of sorts in which each barber demonstrates his skill with a razor. Pirelli represents on a smaller scale than the Judge the dishonesty that Todd sees in the judicial system of London; Turpin's self-serving lies are in parallel with Pirelli's false advertising. Later, Tobias reveals that his own head of thick curls, said to have grown as a result of his using the elixir, is a wig, confirming Todd's assertion that Pirelli is lying about his product's effectiveness and exploiting his servant for financial gain. Freer points out Todd's position in this scene as an anti-capitalist hero. He argues, "Todd debunks the performing trickster who bewitches the crowd via commercial rhetoric. Transported to Australia for a crime he never committed, Todd is seen as a gothic victim, who occupies a homeless space of non-identity" (70). It is during this scene that Todd establishes his assumed identity with the people of London by proving his skill as a barber and proving, by wagering his fine razors against so little money, that he has no intention of overcharging his customers the

way Pirelli does. In doing this, Todd positions himself in opposition not just to Pirelli in particular but to mistreatment of London's poor in general. His belief that they are better off dead, while extreme and difficult to sympathize with, simply further serves this position; at least corpses cannot be tricked by fraudulent performing barbers or wrongly imprisoned. His longer struggle with Turpin, while motivated by a highly personal affront, also confirms his stance not against the common people of London but with them.

Todd also presents a solution to the problem of accumulating filth by finding somewhere to put the dead bodies, as I have already established in Chapter Two. This is a personal problem for Todd and Mrs. Lovett, since corpses would certainly reveal their criminal activity, but it is also a larger problem for their city. London is overrun with the poor and the dead, and the city needs some way to address this problem in the same way that New York in the '70s had to find something to do with abundant dead bodies. Though it is Mrs. Lovett's initial suggestion, hatched out of financial need, to use the corpses as meat in her pies, Todd's acquiescence—and his trapdoor chair—expedites the process. In this way, the pair also offer a potential solution to Mrs. Lovett's poverty as it represents the poverty of other small business owners in London. Judith Wilt argues, "In Sondheim's musical thriller, Sweeney is the policeman-philosopher and Mrs. Lovett is the capitalist, middle-class to the core. She smells money in the wind from the moment Sweeney wins five pounds in a contest with a rival barber. She approves the logic of his first killing on business principles" (82). But Mrs. Lovett's cold approval and her willingness to feed Todd's victims to her customers makes her a problem to their society as well, since she, unlike Todd and Batman, is committing crimes not in order to serve justice or the good of her community but solely for personal gain. She hopes to win Todd's favor by participating in his

pursuit of vengeance, and ultimately she espouses the avarice of the original version of the story. Yet Todd solves this problem, as well; after learning that she has lied about Lucy's death, he throws her into her own oven.

While both Batman and Sweeney Todd operate under moral codes more complex than they first seem, they are not equally good. Todd is inescapably a murderer, and while he is undoubtedly the hero of his story, he is also a villain. In the end, he solves the problem he becomes himself; his throat is slit by his own razor. It is Tobias who wields the weapon and ends Todd's life, but Tobias is only in the position to do so because of Todd's actions. Tobias comes into Todd and Mrs. Lovett's service after Todd murders his master, Pirelli. Without Todd's intervention, Tobias would be mistreated, but in no position to suspect and kill Todd. Todd's cold behavior toward Tobias—and often Mrs. Lovett—leads Tobias to fear him. When he discovers the secret of the meat pies, he is locked in the bakehouse to prevent him from acting upon his suspicions. Finally, Tobias emerges from the sewers to which he has fled in hysteria after finding the human flesh in the pies. He creeps up from the grate and cuts Todd's throat. Not only does Todd provide his own murder weapon, but he creates and shapes his own murderer.

Sweeney Todd is a unique story in many ways, despite its many adaptations and revivals. But just as the original narrative borrowed themes from famous British stories and global myths about murderers and cannibals, Sondheim's musical version draws from other popular stories of its time and before. In 1979, when *Sweeney Todd* first entered the American cultural imagination, although it was an adaptation of a well-known British story, it was a new story for American audiences. But Batman was already a familiar fixture in American minds when *Sweeney Todd* came to Broadway, and even more so when *The Dark Knight Returns* was

published in 1986. Just as British audiences recognized Sweeney Todd easily because his story has been so frequently told in the UK, American audiences, even by the 1970s, knew Batman very well. Looking at the newly Americanized version of *Sweeney Todd* through this lens of a quintessentially American story therefore allows for insights that would be inaccessible without such a perspective.

This frame of reference also confirms that the vigilante and his quest to serve the city of London is entirely absent from *The String of Pearls*, the original Sweeney Todd novel. Corruption and exploitation are certainly themes of the original text; as Creechan argues, “[The musical] presents an alternative radical nostalgia, the aim of which is to use the Victorian setting and aesthetic to highlight continuing exploitation of the working classes under capitalism” (100). This is possible only because the 1846 novel provides an appropriate setting to explore this exploitation, but Sondheim’s focus on corruption responds only to the American values espoused by the Batman narrative. In the original novel, Sweeney Todd is acting only out of self-interest and greed. He has no desire to avenge a lost family or a destroyed life; cold-blooded avarice and a sweeping disregard for the interests of others are enough to motivate him to mass murder and worse. Aside from the seeds of filth and corruption that the original story plants, it is only Sondheim’s adaptation that presents an American vigilante.

As Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones suggest, “It may be that the figure of Sweeney himself serves as a prototype for modern fictional criminals, either as an example of the criminal without shame, the believer in vigilante justice in a society where the law remains susceptible to corruption...or else of the criminal as connoisseur, the serial killer as would-be artist” (7). Each version of the character over the story’s many adaptations embodies these different kinds of

killers in varying degrees. The original version of Sweeney Todd is undoubtedly a “criminal without shame.” And while both the 1846 version and Sondheim’s version display elements of the “criminal as connoisseur,” Sondheim’s musical adaptation clearly responds to the American belief in solutions and rejection of tragedy to offer up Sweeney Todd as an antihero vigilante who takes the law into his own hands. Todd’s methods are condemnable, as is his extremism, but his desire for vengeance and his distrust of a system that has failed him so egregiously in the past are understandable and even universally embraced by Sondheim’s American audience.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is a product of its immediate American cultural context, even though it is part of a long line of adaptations of a story first presented in a British penny blood. The striking differences between the two versions highlight dominant social norms and trends in each cultural moment, especially since the twentieth-century musical version also shares so many themes with the popular American stories of its time. The comparison between two versions of the same story is illuminating on multiple levels. Cross-cultural adaptation is especially challenging; in this case, the anchoring example of *The Dark Knight Returns*, as it reifies and expands upon the values already established in the Batman universe, has been a helpful focal point from which to examine Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Stories that are told over and over again are revealing in their similarities, but their divergences are the key to examining the underlying cultural atmosphere that makes each adaptation possible.

The story of Sweeney Todd, clearly, is a rich example of American popular culture that provides significant insight into American readers and consumers, particularly as they react against and differ from the British. The story has found its way into the hearts of its new American audience, even earning a film adaptation of its own. Its quintessentially American themes of love, filth, and vigilante heroism situate it in its late twentieth-century moment and allow it to continue to resonate with Americans in the twenty-first century.

Reading Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* against its precursor text, *The String of Pearls*, and against more contemporary American stories draws attention to some principal preoccupations of 1970s urban America in which the musical was born. Sondheim's transformation of the original story's key characters and their motivations suggests that American audiences had come to prefer complex love stories with unexpected and nuanced romantic conflicts. The musical's emphasis on material filth as well as on its figurative resonance points to Sondheim's critique of '70s urban culture in the United States, and the many similarities between the fictionalized London that Sondheim created and Frank Miller's Gotham City in *The Dark Knight Returns* confirm this metaphorical connection between literal filth and corrupt government. Further, Todd's interactions with the representations of filth in society recasts his actions as well-intentioned, if misguided, public service as much as they are deviant and harmful. The original penny blood was very popular in its time, and that popularity resulted in dozens of adaptations between the original and Sondheim's musical. But *Sweeney Todd* was, for over a century, a British story. Its transformation into a story by and for Americans therefore points to many key cultural shifts in the United States over the first three quarters of the twentieth century.

American urban culture since the 1970s has remained focused on these kinds of questions. Twentieth-century Americans tended to prefer love stories that defy convention and that offer complexity in their plots, and this preference extended into the twenty-first century as well, a trend that is evident in the popular American narratives of long after 1979. Globalization has led to more connected and more tolerant cultures, though that process is polarizing, as well. Stereotypical representations of individuals and their relationships have become less and less satisfactory for contemporary American audiences as a result. A closer look at some of the most

popular fictional works among Americans can provide useful insights into the details of this trend and its origins, as well as its eventual direction.

Especially cogent is Sondheim's representation of filth and corruption in New York City, a theme that has been exploited in countless popular narratives, including but by no means limited to several Batman film adaptations, since *Sweeney Todd* came to Broadway. In fact, Louise Creechan argues that "Sondheim and Wheeler's musical encouraged 1970s audiences to recognize that the social critique of *Sweeney Todd* was as much applicable to contemporary society in the context of growing social, economic, and industrial unrest" (104). She suggests that the musical uses the nostalgia of its informative precursor texts, such as the original penny blood and Bond's stage version to tell a story about its contemporary society. He does this by incorporating themes common to America's most popular stories and heroes. This trend does not stop with Sondheim. And of course, heroes, especially heroes who resist the straightforward "good vs. evil" conflict models, have continued to fascinate Americans well into the twenty-first century. Military operatives and comic book superheroes have frequently appeared on the silver screen since the 1970s, and as these stories change in response to specific advancements and shifts in their audiences' cultural spaces, they offer new criticisms of those cultures and offer new solutions to problems.

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