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Sweeney Todd

The Demon Barber of Fleet Street



Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by Hugh Wheeler

Based on a version of *Sweeney Todd* by Christopher Bond

Study Guide by Sarah Schlesinger and Fred Carl

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About Sweeney Todd

Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street by composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim and librettist Hugh Wheeler, is both a melodramatic musical thriller packed with sensational surprises and an examination of class structure and a corrupt justice system. The musical, which opened on Broadway March 1, 1979, was originally directed by Harold Prince.

Based on a version of the popular English melodrama *Sweeney Todd* by British playwright Christopher Bond, the show is set in Fleet Street and its environs in 19th century London. The main character is a barber who slits the throats of his customers and turns the corpses over to a female accomplice in the shop below his. The accomplice, in turn, grinds up the remains and bakes them into meat pies.

The characters in *Sweeney Todd* feel impelled to take these horrific actions. The universe of the musical has frightening similarities to our own often unfeeling, off-kilter world. In many ways, it is a reflection of the complex times in which we live and the violence which has a strangle-hold on our popular media and many of our streets and cities.

The show's references to the Industrial Revolution's impact on the dignity of the individual also has resonance for us as our society seeks to stabilize the balance of men and machines.

Sweeney Todd is an intricate weave of extravagant emotion and violent action; comedy and tragedy co-exist in a tense balance. This exquisitely crafted and powerful theatrical masterpiece seeks to make us aware of our own insensitivity to the suffering around us and our too-often passive tolerance of the growing violence of our society.

The Characters in Sweeney Todd

(In order of appearance)

ANTHONY HOPE, a cheerful, young ship's first mate.

SWEENEY TODD, a heavy-set, gloomy man with an air of brooding, slightly nerve-chilling self-absorption.

BEGGAR WOMAN, a ragged, mad creature of the streets.

MRS. LOVETT, a vigorous, slatternly woman in her forties.

JUDGE TURPIN, an egocentric, autocratic magistrate.

THE BEADLE, an obsequious assistant to Judge Turpin.

JOHANNA, a very young, exquisitely beautiful girl with a long mane of shiny blonde hair.

TOBIAS RAGG, a simple-minded adolescent.

PIRELLI, an excessively flamboyant Italian with a glittering suit, thick wavy hair, and a dazzling smile. He is actually an Irishman, Daniel O'Higgins, masquerading as an Italian.

JONAS FOGG, the owner of the lunatic asylum.

THE COMPANY, serves as a commenting chorus and portrays the citizens of London who frequent the Fleet Street area, inmates of the lunatic asylum, police and other supporting characters.

Plot Synopsis

Prologue

As the audience enters, an organist sits at a gigantic organ and plays funeral music. A drop depicting the social structure of 19th century is hung on the stage. Two men dig a grave at the front of the stage and disappear six feet into the earth, leaving piles of dirt behind. A police warden enters when it is time for the show to begin and urges the diggers to hurry. He is joined by two workmen who pull down the drop curtain for the show, foreshadowing the inevitable fall of the social structure. The deafening sound of a shrill factory whistle is heard. There is a blackout. When the lights come up, we can see the company in place.

A man steps forward and begins to sing "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd." One by one the members of the company recount the tale of Sweeney, who owned a barber shop on Fleet Street which serviced socially prominent customers. As they sing, a blinding light illuminates an upstage iron door. Two men come through the door, carrying a body in a bag. They are followed by a woman with a canister marked "Flour." The men dump the body into the grave; the woman dumps black ashes from the canister on top of the body. As the chorus continues to sing of Sweeney Todd, describing him as a highly skilled barber and an inconspicuous individual, Sweeney rises out of the grave and joins the song. The company promises that Todd's tale will now be fully revealed.

Act One

A clock tower chimes in the early morning light. Anthony Hope, a young sailor, and Sweeney Todd enter. They both express their feelings about being back in London ("No Place Like London"). Anthony is genuinely happy to be back in the city, but Todd's response is full of grim irony. Todd is thanking Anthony for saving his life at sea when the two men are accosted by a ragged, crazed Beggar Woman who begs for money and offers them sexual favors. She thinks she recog-

nizes Sweeney, but he fends her off. Anthony assures Sweeney the beggar is not to be feared; she is just one of the legion of beggars roaming the streets of London. Todd, overcome by the ghostly shadows of memory, refuses Anthony's offers of financial assistance and help. Instead, he recounts the tale of "A Barber and His Wife" describing a barber and his beautiful wife who was coveted by a richer, more powerful man of the law. The barber was removed from London so the vicious predator could ensnare the wife. Anthony asked how the story ended and Sweeney says it was too many years ago. No one would know. He leaves Anthony, saying he plans to stay in the vicinity of Fleet Street.

Sweeney finds Mrs. Lovett's Pie Shop and stands outside the building gazing at it. He enters and sees Mrs. Lovett chopping suet and flicking flies off the trays of pies with a dirty rag.

She serves him a meat pie, singing "The Worst Pies in London" to describe her culinary accomplishments. She explains she is just a poor woman alone, trying to make her way in a harsh world. He asks why she doesn't rent the empty room over the shop if she is in need of money. She replies no one wants the room because it is haunted; a handsome barber named Benjamin Barker used to live there before he was transported to Australia.

Mrs. Lovett then recounts the fate of Benjamin Barker's pretty young wife ("Poor Thing"). A Judge and his Beadle both lusted after the woman, although she resisted their advances. Consequently, they had her husband arrested on false charges and transported to Botany Bay, leaving the young woman with a year-old daughter, Johanna. After the husband's departure, they invited her to a party at the Judge's mansion, got her drunk and raped her in the midst of a masked ball. When Sweeney Todd shouts in anguish at this news, Mrs. Lovett realizes he is Benjamin Barker.

Demanding to learn the fate of his family, Barker hears his wife Lucy took arsenic and that Judge Turpin adopted his daughter, Johanna. Saying he survived his fifteen years in exile by dreaming of returning to his wife and daughter, Todd swears to take revenge on the Judge and the Beadle. When Mrs. Lovett asks how he plans to live without money, Todd says it doesn't matter. She brings him his razors which she had hidden away when the Judge came to take Todd's daughter. Todd is mesmerized by the razors, seeing in them the instrument of his revenge. As he sings of his vision of what he and his razors will accomplish together ("My Friends"), Mrs. Lovett sings of her romantic feelings for him. He holds the biggest razor up to the light and proclaims "my right arm is complete again!"

The scene shifts to Judge Turpin's mansion. Johanna, on an upper level of the house, sings to the caged birds of a passing birdseller ("Green Finch and Linnet Bird"). She wonders how they can sing when they, like herself, are captives. Anthony appears on the street, sees Johanna and instantly they fall in love with each other ("Ah, Miss"). Suddenly, the Beggar Woman appears, startling them both. Johanna disappears into the house. The Beggar Woman tells Anthony he is standing in front of Judge Turpin's house and should beware of trespassing. Anthony buys a bird for Johanna. He calls to her and presents the bird ("Johanna"). They stand absorbed with each other, not noticing the approach of Judge Turpin and the Beadle who take the lovers by surprise. The Judge orders Johanna into the house. She leaves the bird behind. The Beadle cautions Anthony to stay away and strangles the bird as a warning.

In St. Dunstan's Marketplace, a painted caravan announces the presence of Signor Adolfo Pirelli (Haircutter-Barber-Dentist to his royal majesty the King of Naples) and his baldness banishing miracle elixir. Todd intends to steal away Pirelli's customers by showing him up as a fraud.

Tobias, Pirelli's simple-minded assistant, beats a tin drum to attract a crowd ("Pirelli's Miracle Elixir"). Although the crowd responds to Tobias's pitch, Todd and Mrs. Lovett begin a slander campaign against the elixir and people demand their money back. Tobias tries to distract them but to no avail. He points out Pirelli who appears and boasts of his own prowess as a barber. Todd challenges Pirelli to a shaving contest. In a competition judged by the Beadle, Todd wins ("The Contest"). Then in a tooth-pulling contest, during which Pirelli attempts to pull a tooth from Tobias, Todd triumphs a second time. The Beadle is very impressed, and gets the address of Todd's shop, promising to appear soon. When the Beadle thinks he recognizes Todd, Mrs. Lovett assures him this is not possible.

After an encounter with the Beggar Woman, Mrs. Lovett climbs the stairs to Todd's quarters where he is waiting eagerly for the Beadle to appear. Mrs. Lovett tells him to be patient ("Wait") as she plans the redecoration of his drab quarters with daisies and other homey touches. When Todd wonders how long it will take to ensnare the judge, she again tells him to relish making the plan.

Anthony appears at Todd's door, having spotted the sign, and tells him of his encounter with Johanna, unaware she is Sweeney's daughter. He asks if he can bring her to Todd's shop for safekeeping after spiriting her out of her father's house that night. Having secured Todd's assistance, he leaves. Mrs. Lovett suggests Sweeney kill Anthony and keep Johanna with him. She promises she will be a splendid mother to Johanna. Pirelli and Tobias appear. Mrs. Lovett takes Tobias downstairs for a meat pie. Pirelli reveals his real identity as a former Irish apprentice to Benjamin Barker. He tries to blackmail Todd by threatening to reveal that Todd is really Barker. They struggle. Todd renders Pirelli unconscious. Todd stuffs him in a chest when Tobias appears. Tobias sits on the chest but doesn't notice Pirelli's hand hanging out of the trunk. Todd persuades the boy to go to the kitchen for more meat pies.

Once Tobias has gone, Todd pulls Pirelli out of the chest and slashes his throat. Mrs. Lovett offers the unsuspecting Tobias a glass of gin.

Leaving court, the Judge announces to the Beadle his intention to marry Johanna. At the same time, Anthony is proposing to Johanna ("Kiss Me"). As the Judge continues on his way home, the Beadle delicately suggests Turpin pay more attention to his personal appearance to heighten his appeal to Johanna ("Ladies in Their Sensitivities"). Recalling Sweeney's excellent work, the Beadle suggests to the judge he make a visit to Sweeney's shop. As the Judge plans his personal make-over at Sweeney's hands, Anthony and Johanna sink to the floor in the throes of passion ("Quartet").

At the pie shop, Mrs. Lovett discovers Pirelli's fate. When Todd wants to kill Tobias too, she disagrees. The Judge appears in Todd's shop. Mrs. Lovett goes downstairs to distract Tobias. The Judge confides in Todd about his forthcoming marriage. Todd prepares to slit the judge's throat, but he takes his time, savoring the moment before his anticipated revenge. Together they sing "Pretty Women" with the Judge lusting for Johanna and Sweeney singing ironically of his lost wife. He is about to kill the judge when Anthony rushes in, blurting out the news of his planned elopement. The Judge leaves in a fury, announcing his intention to lock Johanna away, and telling Todd he will not be back.

Enraged at losing the chance to kill the Judge, Sweeney throws Anthony out of the shop, and announces his intention to kill everyone he can to get ready for the inevitable destruction of the Judge ("Epiphany"). Mrs. Lovett reminds him they have to dispose of Pirelli's body. She has an inspiration. They can recycle his victims into meat pies.

They sing victoriously ("A Little Priest"); she has found a seemingly inexhaustible supply of fresh meat for her pies and he will get his revenge on the human race.

Act Two

Thanks to her new-found prosperity, Mrs. Lovett has expanded her shop to include an outdoor eating garden. She now wears a fancy gown and Tobias is attired in a waiter's apron. Her shop is mobbed with customers who crave the new pies ("God, That's Good!"). The Beggar Woman lurks around. An elaborate new barber chair is moved into Todd's quarters. Todd and Mrs. Lovett set up a complicated system by which Todd sends his victims down a chute directly into the bakehouse where there is a grinding machine. Mrs. Lovett runs out of pies. She puts up a "Sold Out" sign. A barbershop customer appears. She takes the sign down.

Anthony searches the streets for Johanna ("Johanna"). At the same time, Todd dreams of his daughter and systematically kills the customers who sit in his chair. The Beggar Woman tries to warn passers-by about the strange odors and smoke coming from Mrs. Lovett's bakehouse. No one responds. In the lunatic asylum where the Judge has placed her, Johanna joins the song, dreaming of the moment when Anthony will free her. When a man enters the shop, with a child (a potential witness), Sweeney is temporarily thwarted in his murderous revenge.

Anthony hears Johanna's voice and discovers she is in the Asylum. He tries to rescue her, but the Beadle stops him and tells the police to bash his head. Anthony escapes.

Mrs. Lovett sits with Todd in the evening and dreams of their future ("By The Sea"). Throughout her fantasy of their married life together at the seashore, Todd is totally unaware of her words. He is lost in his thoughts of the Judge. Anthony appears to report that Turpin has locked Johanna in a madhouse. Todd has the idea to send Anthony into the asylum as a wigmaker, since the asylum owner sells the hair of the inmates to the highest bidder. He gives Anthony a gun and tells

him to bring Johanna to the barber shop after the escape. Then Todd writes to Judge Turpin, telling him he can find Johanna and Anthony at the barber shop that evening.

Mrs. Lovett sits with Tobias in the early evening in the eating garden. As she knits him a muffler, they exchange words about their warm feelings for each other. He is devoted to her and promises no one will harm her (“Not While I’m Around”). He suggests something about Sweeney Todd is suspicious. When Mrs. Lovett pulls out Pirelli’s purse, he recognizes it. She says Todd gave it to her, which only further feeds Tobias’s doubts. She invites Tobias into the bakehouse where he is usually forbidden to go. He is delighted. Once there, she allows him to grind the meat for pies and he forgets his concerns. She leaves him grinding and locks the door to the bakehouse.

As she returns upstairs, she finds the Beadle at the harmonium in her parlor. He has come in response to complaints about a foul smell from her chimney. She says she can’t take him into the bakehouse until Mr. Todd comes home. She distracts the Beadle by singing with him (“Parlor Songs”). Todd arrives. He takes the Beadle upstairs for a free shave before his inspection of the ovens. In the bakehouse, Tobias begins to suspect that the remains of humans are used for the pies just as the Beadle’s body comes down the chute. He realizes he is locked in and, whimpering, disappears down the cellar steps.

Mrs. Lovett tells Todd Tobias suspects them. She wants Todd to dispense with Tobias at once, but Todd is focused on extracting his revenge from the Judge.

Anthony comes to save Johanna at the asylum, but when the owner tries to stop him, he cannot bring himself to shoot. Johanna grabs the gun and kills the owner. They escape. The lunatics are freed from the asylum and spill with euphoric excitement into the street (“City on

Fire"). Mrs. Lovett and Todd look for Tobias. The Beggar Woman searches for the Beadle.

Anthony and Johanna arrive at the barber shop. She wears a sailor suit. At Anthony's insistence, Johanna stays behind as he leaves to hire a coach for their escape to Plymouth. The Beggar Woman appears. Johanna hides in a trunk. The Beggar Woman surveys the room and being there seems to stimulate something within her. She cradles and begins singing to an imaginary infant.

Todd discovers her. She tries to warn him about Mrs. Lovett and again wonders if she doesn't know him. He turns on her, slits her throat and releases her down the chute. The Judge enters. Sweeney pretends Johanna is safely with Mrs. Lovett and is longing to be reunited with him. Todd convinces the Judge to have a shave to prepare for his meeting with Johanna. The Judge recognizes Sweeney as Benjamin Barker just as the Judge's throat is slit.

Todd starts out of the room to deal with Tobias as Johanna emerges from the trunk. Mistaking her for a sailor because of her disguise, Todd tries to attack her, but she escapes. He runs to the bakehouse. Mrs. Lovett is screaming "Die! Die! God in heaven—die!!" to the Judge who is hanging on to her skirt. As he dies, she notices the body of the Beggar Woman.

She frantically tries to drag the Beggar Woman to the oven. Todd sees the woman in the light and realizes she is his wife, Lucy. He accuses Mrs. Lovett of deceiving him. She says she never said Lucy died, only that she took poison. She was trying to protect him ("Final Sequence"). She tries to stem his anger and he pretends his forgiveness by waltzing with her. He waltzes her to the oven and shoves her in. Then he cradles the Beggar Woman in his arms. Tobias appears, his hair now completely white from shock. He kills Sweeney with the razor, which has

fallen on the floor. Constables, Anthony, and Johanna appear. Tobias has lost his mind; he cannot stop turning the handle on the grinder.

The company sings "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd." They claim to see the Sweeney in each of us. At the end, Sweeney glares at the audience malevolently and he slams the iron door.

Themes and Topics to Explore

Questions and Assignments

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics suggested by the style and content of *Sweeney Todd*.

Avenues for exploring each theme and topic are suggested in the form of:

Questions:

Designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show.

Assignments:

Designed to be researched and written out of class.

Themes and Topics to Explore

The Dramatic Structure and Theme of Sweeney Todd

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Tell the story of *Sweeney Todd* in one sentence.
- Select one verb that best describes the central action of *Sweeney Todd*.
- Identify the theme of *Sweeney Todd* in one sentence.
- When did the action of *Sweeney Todd* grab your attention? Where did you start to be interested, start to care, start to become excited, thrilled or delighted?
- What is at stake for the major characters in *Sweeney Todd* ?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts

- Tell the story of *Sweeney Todd* in one brief paragraph. Include all the main characters.
- How is foreshadowing used in *Sweeney Todd*? Make a list of everything in the script that helps to prepare you for something that happens later.
- Trace the action in *Sweeney Todd*. How does one event lead to another? Relate the story in bold action strokes: i.e., Character A does this, which makes this happen. Then Character B does this, which causes this. And so on.
- Explain how we are given information relative to the theme of *Sweeney Todd* and the attitude we are supposed to have towards the theme.

Exposition: The Prologue of Sweeney Todd

Questions: Discussion and Writing Prompts

- What is a prologue? What is the source of the term?
- What does the opening section of a movie, novel, play or musical play have to accomplish? What are some of the devices used in each of these forms to accomplish these goals?
- Look at the prologue of *Sweeney Todd*. How is it structured? List what occurs in the opening? What does each section of the prologue accomplish? What do we learn about the characters and their past histories? What does it tell us to expect from the show ahead?
- What does the term “exposition” mean? List all the forms of exposition you find in the prologue and first scene of *Sweeney Todd*.
- What is the significance of the grave and gravediggers in the opening?
- Look back at the opening of the show. When the show was over, did the show deliver what the opening promised?
- In the original setting for the Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd*, the repressive British social pecking order was represented by a beehive painted on the drop that hung onstage as the audience entered. Why do you think a beehive was chosen as a visual metaphor?
- Imagine you have been given the task of creating a new opening for *Sweeney Todd*. Describe your opening. Explain why you have chosen it.
- The opening of *Sweeney Todd* is in the form of a folk ballad. Find other examples of folk ballads. Write a folk ballad of your own detailing the story of a contemporary villain or outlaw currently in the news.

Sweeney Todd as Musical Theatre

- In musical theatre the music, along with the dialogue and lyrics, helps to tell the story. Music can add to our understanding of the characters, or it can tell us more about the time and place of the story, or it can help us understand the theme of the show.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Composer / lyricist Stephen Sondheim chose to underscore *Sweeney Todd* with almost continuous music in the style of a suspenseful and frightening film. In what recent suspenseful films has music been a major factor in conveying a sense of fright to the audience and manipulating their emotions? How did music manipulate your emotions in *Sweeney Todd*?
- Why do you think organ music is used at the beginning of the piece?
- Each main character in *Sweeney Todd* has a musical theme—try to identify them. Find the moment when these themes collide at the end of the work. A musical motif representing Todd’s wife Lucy was planted early in Act I and repeated later as a clue to her identity. Can you find it?
- The music in *Sweeney Todd* is often romantic when the meaning of the song suggests other emotions. For example, Todd and Judge Turpin sing “Pretty Women” as the barber is about to murder the Judge. Todd sings “My Friend” while adoring his razor as a potential instrument of death and revenge. What is the impact of this juxtaposition?

Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- Read Christopher Bond’s play *Sweeney Todd*. Compare the experience of reading the drama and seeing / reading / listening to the musical. What is the impact of the use of blank verse in Bond’s play?

- What is double entendre? How is it used in the song “A Little Priest?” Write a paragraph or a few verses of a poem or song lyrics using double entendre.
- Why do you think rhyme is used in musical theatre lyrics?
- Write a few verses in rhyme about something you are looking forward to. Then write the same thing in prose. How is the experience of writing in the two forms different?
- What is internal rhyme? What is alliteration? What is assonance? Find examples of all three in the lyrics of *Sweeney Todd*.
- What is an epiphany? Why do you think the song Sweeney Todd sings after Anthony has destroyed his opportunity to kill Judge Turpin is called “Epiphany”? What happens to Todd during this song? Think of an epiphanic moment for a character in literature. Write a prose outline of the character’s breakdown and/or realization. Try to turn it into a song lyric.
- The “Dies irae,” or Day of Doom, a solemn medieval chant describing the Last Judgment, occurs at the high point of the Catholic funeral service, or Requiem Mass. It is quoted in the opening chorus of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” (on the lyric “Swing your razor high, Sweeney”) and it is employed throughout the work. The “Dies irae” is usually associated with death and the fear of death, and has been quoted by many composers, including Mozart, Hector Berlioz and Giuseppe Verdi. What message does this chant carry in *Sweeney Todd*?
- “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” (the number in which the “Dies irae” is used most frequently) is repeated at various times throughout the show. What is the effect of this repetition? Is this repetition important to the theme of the show? How?

- Musical and lyrical repetition play a huge role in *Sweeney Todd*. In “No Place Like London,” Sweeney and Anthony sing the same words and to almost identical music (although Sweeney sings the same melody as Anthony, it is harmonized differently). Do they both mean the same thing? Does the repetition tell you anything about the two characters? Listen to the cast recording and trace other methods of musical and lyrical repetition in the score.
- When you listen to a song, you'll notice composers sometimes use the accompaniment to show the character's emotional state or to give other important information about the scene. What does the accompaniment to “Kiss Me” tell you about the emotional state of Johanna and Anthony? List each song and describe the effect of the accompaniment has on your understanding of the scene.
- Some of the songs in *Sweeney Todd* (“A Little Priest” and “The Contest”) are comic songs. What makes a lyric “funny?” How does the music tell you the songs are comic? Can you find instances in *Sweeney Todd* where the lyrics are comic, but the music is not?
- Some stories are set in locations that naturally contain music. What kinds of music do you think might have been heard in mid-19th century London? Do you think any of the songs in *Sweeney Todd* could have been heard in mid-19th century London?
- It is important that all the different elements in a musical fit together and present the same story. Composers who use many different styles of music in a show also need to make sure the songs all sound like they belong in the same show. Stephen Sondheim uses many different styles of music in *Sweeney Todd*: “The Contest” is a parody of Rossini’s opera, *The Barber of Seville*; “By the Sea” sounds much like an English music hall number; “Johanna” is a romantic ballad. Do these different styles all seem to fit in the show?

- Sometimes a composer needs to find a song or musical idea or motif that repeats and helps to string together all the different songs and ideas in the show. Discuss the way “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” provides the link unifying all the different song styles in *Sweeney Todd*.
- Select one of the following segments of *Sweeney Todd*:

ACT ONE

“The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”
“No Place Like London”
“The Barber and His Wife”
“The Worst Pies in London”
“Poor Thing”
“My Friends”
“Green Finch and Linnet Bird”
“Ah, Miss”
“Johanna”
“Pirelli’s Miracle Elixir”
“The Contest”
“Wait”
“Kiss Me”
“Ladies in Their Sensitivities”
“Quartet”
“Pretty Women”
“Epiphany”
“A Little Priest”

ACT TWO

“God, That’s Good”
“Johanna”
“By The Sea”
“Not While I’m Around”
“Parlor Songs”
“City on Fire”
“Final Sequence”
“The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”

Summarize the contents of the segment. Discuss:

- a. What do we learn about the character or characters and their personal philosophies from the lyrics and the music?
- b. What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from the lyrics and the music?

The Characters in Sweeney Todd

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- The great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht advanced the idea of “the alienation effect” which was an attempt to divorce the audience from emotional identification with the play’s characters. This behavior presumably prevented them from experiencing catharsis, pity or fear—the requirements set down by Aristotle for dramatic effectiveness. Does this happen in *Sweeney Todd*? If so, does this alienation prevent the work from being dramatically effective on any level?

Assignments: Writing Prompts

- When playwrights create characters, they often invent “character maps” for their characters before they begin to write. Reverse this process and create a character map for Sweeney Todd, Mrs. Lovett, Anthony, Johanna, the Beggar Woman, Tobias, the Judge and the Beadle. In your map describe their physical and emotional characteristics in great detail. Describe a typical day in each of their lives.
- Write an inner monologue (a speech that a character gives to her or himself) revealing what you think the character might have been thinking in one of these situations:

Sweeney Todd, the night before he arrived in London after his return from exile.

Sweeney Todd, immediately after he hears Mrs. Lovett's Act
One explanation of the fate of his wife and daughter and
rediscovers his razors.

Anthony, after he has fallen in love with Johanna and seen
the Beadle strangle the bird.

Mrs. Lovett, after Anthony asks permission to bring Johanna
to Sweeney's shop.

Judge Turpin, after he hears Anthony speak of his plan to
elope with Johanna.

Tobias, when he is resting in the kitchen after a busy night of
serving meat pies in Mrs. Lovett's establishment.

Johanna, as she sits in the asylum.

The Beadle, when he is sitting at the harmonium, waiting for
Mrs. Lovett.

The Beggar Woman, when she re-enters the barbershop
immediately before Sweeney kills her.

Tobias, when he is alone in the basement with the evidence
of the crimes being committed by Sweeney.

Mrs. Lovett, when she realizes Sweeney has killed the Beg-
gar Woman.

Sweeney, when he realizes he has inadvertently murdered
his wife.

The Theme of Revenge in Sweeney Todd

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Earlier adapters of the tale of *Sweeney Todd* suggested Sweeney's actions were entirely based on greed. In the musical *Sweeney Todd*, Sweeney's behavior is motivated by reasons other than greed. Does the addition of different motive make his actions more acceptable?
- Sweeney Todd is portrayed as an example of a good, simple man who is assaulted by a corrupt social order. What are some other examples of main characters in this situation in literature, plays and film? What are some examples of real-life parallels?
- Is Sweeney's desire for revenge justified? Is revenge ever justified? How else should he have sought retribution?
- How does Sweeney's increasing inability to change his situation manifest itself in his behavior?
- After his "Epiphany," Sweeney vows to take on all humanity as his enemy. Discuss this shift from the personal to the larger canvas on a symbolic level. How does it change Sweeney's scope as a character? What larger social mission does he take on?
- When Mrs. Lovett suggests her plan to use Sweeney's victims as the filling for her meat pies, he seizes it with gusto. Why?
- At the end of *Sweeney Todd*, the actors point at the audience, suggesting the desire for revenge is universal. Do you agree?
- How does Sweeney's brand of justice compare with the kind of justice to which he was subjected? Is one morally superior to the other?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts:

- How is Sweeney Todd like other serial killers in history who express a sense of impotence through rage? Read about the pathology of serial killers.
- Discuss in writing the corrosive effects of societal corruption and indifference on individual behavior in America today.
- Using the character of Sweeney Todd as a departure point, write an essay addressing the following question: “How full of rage does a man have to become before life means nothing?”

Humor and Tragedy in Sweeney Todd

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- For much of the history of the tale of *Sweeney Todd*, authors adapting the story treated it as a spoof. Why do you think this was the case? What is the difference between a spoof and a satire?
- Does the Sondheim-Wheeler *Sweeney Todd* preserve the humor in the story? How? How would the experience of seeing the show be different without the humor?
- Why is the theme of cannibalism so difficult for audiences to confront? Do you think it is any easier for us than it was for the Victorian audience? Why or why not?
- How does humor help the audience deal with the difficult issues (like cannibalism) in *Sweeney Todd* ?
- Often, in spoofs and satires, a character or event or theme actually represents another much darker reality. What does the “man eating man” image represented by the meat pies actually represent on a deeper level?

- What are some examples of the way Americans communicate about serious matters using humor? Does treating serious subjects humorously lessen their importance?
- What is the relationship between humor and tragedy? How is that relationship evident in *Sweeney Todd*?
- Discuss the impact of the co-existence of tragedy and comedy in *Sweeney Todd*. Does either element suffer because of the presence of the other? Is either element strengthened by the presence of the other?
- How do the two main characters represent this “schizophrenic” nature of the piece?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts:

- Write a spoof of a serious issue in your school or community. Write a serious essay about the same issue. Which is more effective? Why?
- What other books, plays or films have addressed the issue of cannibalism? Compare them to *Sweeney Todd* in terms of style and approach to the subject matter.

Sweeney Todd and Mid-19th Century London

The term “Industrial Revolution” was first used to describe a major period of technological and economic change in Britain during the late 18th and 19th centuries. During the years from 1760 to 1850 the steam engine came into widespread use and provided the power for many new machines that replaced human workers.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Do you think the characters in *Sweeney Todd* could have been influenced by the Industrial Revolution and the social consequences that accompanied it?

- In what ways does Sweeney's behavior show us he is the product of the diabolical mechanized age in which he lives?
- In what ways are the sounds of the mechanized age present?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts

- Investigate conditions (i.e., poor local governments, problems of housing, water supply, sanitation, fire and police protection, and unemployment due to mechanization) that affected the workers' lives outside the factory during the Industrial Revolution.
- What was the general quality and the supply of food in mid-19th century London?
- Why must Mrs. Lovett turn to human flesh as a food source? Was fresh affordable meat available in London in the 1850s?
- Mrs. Lovett's shop specialized in pies and breads. Did families cook their own pies and breads? What other cooked foods could be bought in shops in 19th century London?
- Investigate what was happening in London during the period in which *Sweeney Todd* was set. Who was the monarch? What was happening in religion and the arts?
- How did the rich live during this period? Discuss the external decorum of Victorian manners in relation to the ugliness they attempted to hide.
- What did London look like during this period? Smell like? Sound like?

- Read about the real 19th century Fleet Street. How does it compare to the Fleet Street depicted in *Sweeney Todd*?
- How does the treatment of prisoners and asylum inmates in *Sweeney Todd* affect the state of the criminal justice system and hospitals for the mentally ill in that era? When was Bedlam Prison built?
- Discuss the use of asylums as punishment facilities rather than treatment facilities during the 19th century. How were the mentally ill regarded during that period?
- What kind of health care was available to wealthy residents of London in the mid-19th century? What kind of care was available to the rest of the population?
- Explore the history and training of barbers in England. Was it unusual for a barber to pull teeth or perform other medical/surgical tasks?
- Why were prisoners sent to Australia?
- Investigate the powers of judges like Judge Turpin in the 19th century English legal system. Who appointed these judges? What were their qualifications to serve on the bench? How long did they serve? Who reviewed or had the power to reverse their decisions? Compare what you learn about the criminal justice system in 19th-century London to our current system.
- What is a “beadle?”
- What is a plague hospital?
- What is a debtor’s prison?

- How were goods and services dispensed in mid-19th century London? Were traveling vendors a common sight on the streets of mid-19th century London?
- Sweeney's wife was left alone after he had been sent to prison. What was the lot of women left to care for themselves and their families? In what ways did she become vulnerable after he was sent away? How does her predicament compare with the circumstances in which a single mother might find herself in America today?
- Why do you think Sweeney's deranged wife has been wandering the streets for years? Why has nobody come to her aid? Are there people on the streets of your community who are in a state similar to hers? Write a portrait of one of them.
- *Sweeney Todd* presents differing views of London. Discuss these different views.
- Investigate wig-making in 19th-century London. Who wore wigs and why? Where did wig-makers obtain their hair?
- Research other tales of murderers haunting the streets of mid-19th century London. Why do you think these tales arose and why do they continue to hold our interest?
- Explore the way in which Victorian novelists reacted to a world in which traditional social structures were dissolving. For example, you might investigate how George Eliot in novels like *Adam Bede* described the dissolutions of rural communities. Or how the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope focused on the isolation of the individual within the city.

- Explore the “penny dreadfuls,” magazines which carried horror tales and simple wisdoms in London in the 1840s. How is their tone and style related to the tone and style of *Sweeney Todd*?
- Do you consider it ironic that to many people technological advances pull mankind further and further from harmony, humanity and nature even as those advances heighten “standards of living?”

Melodrama

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Melodramas are traditionally filled with:
 - plot contrivances
 - convenient coincidences
 - arbitrary hindrances
 - startling effects
 - frequent emotional shocks
 - frequent climaxes
 - confrontation, pursuit and escape
 - forceful, impassioned language and gesture
 - decadent, villainous aristocrats

Can you find any of these devices in *Sweeney Todd*?

- Melodramas were marked by sentimental excess, violent action and gratuitous villainy. Often they quickly alternated violence, humor and pathos. How are these characteristics of melodrama manifested in *Sweeney Todd*?
- What qualities of *Sweeney Todd* make it more than a melodrama? What gives it tragic overtones that exceed the limits of melodrama?
- What elements of melodrama are present in contemporary forms such as soap opera, action movies, romance novels and TV mini-series?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts:

- Create a concept for a modern melodrama which portrays the victimization of helpless innocence by powerful evil forces. Present your idea in prose form. Write a scene from the melodrama.
- Discuss the melodramatic world view presented in *Sweeney Todd*. Touch on such issues as:
 - the world as an arena of intense ethical struggle.
 - the moral and material polar extremes represented.
 - the manner in which the poor and virtuous are persecuted by the rich and corrupt.
- In melodramas, heroes may be defeated, but they are shown to be morally superior to their oppressors. Is this true of Sweeney Todd? Is he a hero? Discuss in essay form.
- Read an earlier, more melodramatic version of *Sweeney Todd*. How did the meaning of the work change in its musical interpretation?
- Read mid-19th Century melodramas such as Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* ; Tom Taylor's *Ticketleave-man* ; or *The Corsican Brothers* .
- With the exception of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, the other characters are based on specific types of characters in melodramas. For example, Anthony Hope is patterned on a character called Jolly Jack Tar, a naive and patriotic young sailor. Try to find a play in which Jolly Jack Tar appeared. Can you find examples of other character types who appear in *Sweeney Todd* in other melodramas?
- When Mrs. Lovett relates the events that followed Sweeney's exile, the characters onstage mime what she describes. This is a presentational technique called "dumb show" which was often used in melodrama. Learn more about "dumb shows."

Sweeney Todd as Grand Guignol

Grand Guignol is a theatrical form that flourished in Paris at the end of the last century. It was a sensational type of entertainment which included heavy doses of violence, madness, suicide, revenge, suspense, sensational revelations, suffering and tricks.

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- In what ways is *Sweeney Todd* in the Grand Guignol tradition?
- What elements of Grand Guignol does *Sweeney Todd* have in common with a film like *Psycho*?
- Why are people so fascinated with horror films, plays and books?
- Why do you think the choice was made when Sweeney's tale was first told centuries ago to make him a barber? Why is it especially horrific to be betrayed by someone to whom we entrust our safety? Think of other horror tales that are centered around figures in professions we tend to trust.

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts:

- Find other examples of works in the Grand Guignol tradition.
- Write an original story in the Grand Guignol tradition.

Sweeney Todd and The Contemporary World

Questions and Discussion Prompts

- The Victorian writers, in an attempt to give their audiences a respite from the unfairness of life, told Sweeney's story with the point of view that good will always triumph over evil. From what point of view did Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler create their version of the tale? In what ways do think their point of view might have

been shaped by the fact that they were writing in the 1970s and not 1847? If you were adapting the tale now, in what ways do you think your point of view might be shaped by events since *Sweeney Todd*?

- What warnings are there for our society in the tale of *Sweeney Todd*?
- What are the dangers of a society's remaining complacent in the face of increasing brutality? What are some of the causes of such complacency?
- In Sweeney's world, murder becomes commonplace. Is this true in our world?
- How might the level of violence experienced by watching films and television affect our ability to react to the violence around us? Does media violence have a role in causing societal violence?

Assignments: Writing and Research Prompts:

- Write about the pervasiveness of violence in the world around you.
- *Sweeney Todd* is a parable. What is a parable? Write a parable of a circumstance in modern life which concerns you.
- Several different characters relate the same events in *Sweeney Todd*, each from his or her own point of view. Write a three-part story about a contemporary event in which you have three participants each describing the same situation.
- Imagine you have been given the task of adapting the tale of Sweeney Todd. How would you make your adaptation original, faithful to your own vision, and a reflection of the times in which you live? Would your adaptation be a live theatre piece or a film? A play or a musical? What musical style would you choose? Why? When would the show or film be set? What would it look like?

Critical Analysis

Assignment: Writing Report

- Write a review of a performance of *Sweeney Todd*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:
 1. Did the show hold your interest? Why?
 2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience. What was the dialogue like?
 3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a simple story or were there multiple stories?
 4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
 5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add meaning to the show?
 6. Describe the effectiveness of the performers.
 7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
 8. Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

Appendix

The following background material is designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

The Theatrical History of Sweeney Todd

The character of Sweeney Todd first turned up in 14th century French legends and later resurfaced as the bloody hero of cheap British ballads in the beginning of the 19th century. There has been speculation that the character of Sweeney may have been based on a real French or English figure not unlike Jack the Ripper.

A popular playwright, George Dibdin Pitt, dramatized the disturbing tale of a murderous barber and his meat-pie baking friend to be presented at the Britannia Theater in London in 1847. Pitt is believed to have used the horror stories of Thomas Peckett Prest as his source material. Prest wrote for “The People’s Periodical” a Victorian “penny dreadful” that provided its readership with both proverbs and gory stories.

Since the original 1847 dramatization, there have been at least seven other theatrical versions of the tale in England. The story has also been related in countless literary, visual art and dance forms. A play by William Latimer in 1900, a British film in 1936 and a ballet choreographed in 1959 by John Crank are among the better known manifestations of the *Sweeney Todd* tale.

Between 1847 and 1973, a theatrical tradition sprang up around the idea of performing the tale in a joking context. It was played as melodrama for the audience to laugh at, not as serious, believable drama. The viewer was invited to laugh at the exaggerated evil and romance; the drama was performed in a highly artificial theatrical style.

However, when the British playwright Christopher Bond tackled the subject matter in 1968, he chose to return to the spirit of the original Pitt work. He created a work that was highly theatrical, but that also had social resonance. Over the course of 123 years, Sweeney became a character who murdered only out of greed; Bond made him an ordinary man whose happiness is destroyed by a corrupt social order. Todd is portrayed as a victim of a class war; a victim of the Darwinian class struggle — a doomed representative of “the lower zoo” rising up against the “privileged few.”

Bond’s version was carefully plotted, written in blank verse, and it mixed in elements of Jacobean drama, Dumas *pere’s* *The Count of Monte Cristo* and Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*.

Joan Littlewood’s staging of the Bond version of *Sweeney Todd* at Stratford East in 1973, was a production with a strong social statement to make that was nonetheless surrounded by the trappings of its melodramatic heritage—including a piano playing in the lobby at intermission as meat pies and beer were sold.

After seeing this production, Stephen Sondheim became interested in the possibility of adapting the work for the musical theatre. Discovering that the American producers Richard Barr and Charles Woodward were bidding for the American rights to the Bond play, Sondheim approached them with his idea of making the work into a musical. He then recruited Harold Prince to collaborate as director of the piece.

Prince envisioned the work as a study of class struggle and the impact of the inhumanity of machinery. Hugh Wheeler, who joined them as the librettist, saw the piece as a tragedy and found it daunting to convince an audience to have feelings for two such repugnant main characters.

Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street opened on Broadway on March 1, 1979 at the Uris Theatre starring Len Cariou as Sweeney and

Angela Lansbury as Mrs. Lovett. The production was designed by Eugene Lee, the costumes by Franne Lee, and the lights by Ken Billington. Dance and movement were by Larry Fuller.

The show won eight Tony awards and ran for 557 performances. *Sweeney Todd* has become a staple for opera companies around the world and an acknowledged classic.

A 1989 revival at the York Theatre which was later moved to Circle in the Square was praised for its revelation of the work's power even when stripped of the trappings of sets, a full orchestra, and chorus. In the words of critic Frank Rich, the revival showed us, "... a musical of naked rage, chewing up everyone in its path and spitting out blood and tears. The dark heart of the play, the story of a man's revenge against a society that destroyed his wife and daughter stands revealed."

About Melodrama

The term "melodrama" was used to describe a theatrical form in which music was used to underscore and comment on action. The primary exponent of this dramatic form was Guilbert de Pixerecourt, who lived and worked in France during the 19th century. His work combined spectacular settings with a mixture of tragedy, comedy and mime.

The producers of melodrama provided their enthusiastic audiences with obvious plots filled with violent conflict, unmotivated twists, wondrous coincidences, deceptions and conspiracies. In addition to rapid and exciting physical action, melodramas stressed sharply contrasted and simplified characters and a colorful alternation of violence, pathos and humor.

These were highly "disposable" plays which were based on rigid conventions; they were theatrical rather than literary in their appeal. Orig-

inally aimed at the illiterate sector of the audience, melodramas depended on seductions, kidnappings, murders, eerie graveyards and last-minute escapes from disaster as their stock-in-trade. Instead of tragic inevitability, tension was maintained through surprise and coincidence.

The central situation in melodrama was the victimization of the innocent and helpless by powerful evil forces. Four basic characters traditionally fought this struggle: the hero and the heroine, a comic ally who helped them and a villain. Language and gesture were always strong and impassioned.

Striving for astounding effects and potent emotional shocks, melodramas have a lot of climaxes and scenes of confrontation, pursuit and escape ending in striking *tableaux*. Virtue always triumphs.

The writer of melodrama saw the world as filled with endless ethical struggles; the poor are virtuous, but persecuted by the rich and corrupt. The villain embodies evil whether he is a decadent aristocrat, a factory owner or a landlord. Through a reversal of fate, just rewards and punishments are doled out. Even if the hero is defeated, he triumphs by being morally superior to his oppressors.

In the course of presenting this struggle between good and evil, many melodramas also include a level of social or political commentary on issues ranging from the abolition of slavery, to tax and prison reform. As a result, this form of theatre served as a vital source of information for illiterate audiences. Melodramas tended to make useful moral statements as they glorified the common man and his triumph over greed.

As the theatre of the common people, melodrama initially existed at the other end of the spectrum from court drama.

The first melodrama staged in England was *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802. This was a translation of a play by Pixerecourt.

Victorian melodrama was spectacular in its staging, featuring shipwrecks, scenes of fires, explosions, avalanches and city life.

About Grand Guignol

Grand Guignol was a form of sensational entertainment that flourished in small Parisian theaters at the turn of the 20th century and featured heavy doses of violence, madness, suicide, revenge and trick apparitions. It had the same audience impact as a psychological thriller like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* or other horror movies. A former police superintendent, Oscar Meteneier, who was an expert in underworld vice, opened the Theatre du Grand Guignol in Montmartre in 1897. The opening of his theatre marked the high point of this theatrical form.

Guignol is actually the name of a French puppet known for his cruelty. Guignol originated in Lyon and had much in common with Punch of the commedia dell'arte.

The means by which gory acts were simulated were well-kept secrets.

Although a number of popular, established authors wrote for the form including George Courteline and Octave Mirbeau, few of the plays were memorable.

Grand Guignol had a brief success in London in 1908 and toured the United States in 1923. However, graphic horror films led to its gradual decline and eventual demise in 1962.

Gradually, bourgeoisie audiences sought out melodramas as a source of escapist, sensational distraction.

Resources

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