

STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S  
**SWEENEY  
TODD**

Behind the  
*Bloody*  
Musical  
Masterpiece



Rick Pender

Stephen  
Sondheim's  
*Sweeney Todd*



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# 1

## *Attend the Tale of* **Sweeney Todd**

“Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd!” Do those words make you shiver with fear, tremble with anticipation, sit up and listen, possibly even dread what’s coming next? That’s the first line sung in Stephen Sondheim’s masterpiece musical about the “Demon Barber of Fleet Street” (Figure 1.1). What follows is a horror story dripping with blood, told with dark humor, macabre events, scandalous behavior, heartrending tragedy, and magnificent, soaring melodies.

In the late 1970s, as news began to spread about the next Broadway musical from composer and lyricist Sondheim and director Harold Prince, many theater fans were shaking their heads. Say what? A musical about a legendary serial killer and bogeyman named Sweeney Todd, a bloody vengeful barber, as its central character? An incorrigible baker, Mrs. Lovett, who lusts after the barber and moves on from filling meat pies with the remains of stray cats to ground-up human flesh from



**Figure 1.1** *Stephen Sondheim (1930–2021).*  
*Photofest.*

the victims of Sweeney's murderous swath through Victorian London? A corrupt jurist, Judge Turpin, and his sleazy accomplice, Beadle Bamford, who conspired to send Sweeney to a penal colony to clear the judge's lustful path to the barber's wife, then take Sweeney's beautiful daughter as his ward and eventually marry her? These were not the kind of heartwarming or redeemable musical theater characters that audiences were used to finding on Broadway stages through most of the twentieth century.

Sondheim's previous shows did not point to a horror story as his likely next subject. His first work on a Broadway stage—initially as a lyricist working with eminent composer Leonard Bernstein—was *West Side Story* (1957). With a script by veteran playwright Arthur Laurents, it was an updated story based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* about gang warfare and star-crossed lovers in New York City.

Sondheim's second engagement, again as a lyric writer, was *Gypsy* (1959), was another show with a book by Laurents. It was the story of ecdysiast Gypsy Rose Lee (that's a fancy word for a striptease "artist") and especially Rose, her domineering, manipulative stage mother. For that production, Sondheim worked with another brilliant Broadway composer, the prolific Jule Styne, to assemble a score showcasing the vocal talents of theater legend Ethel Merman. *Gypsy* is often considered one of the best shows from Broadway's so-called "Golden Age." Merman's clarion voice was a perfect fit for the larger-than-life Rose, and Merman dug deep to take on this serious, demanding role. Sondheim's talent for writing lyrics again shone forth. But he was ambitious and impatient to expand his work to composing.

His first show combining his skills as a composer and lyricist was a slapstick farce, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962, with comic writers Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart). It was followed by an absurdist, nine-performance musical flop, *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964, yet one more with a book by playwright Laurents) that starred a young Angela Lansbury as a corrupt town mayor. Neither *Forum* nor *Whistle* pointed toward the success Sondheim would find in the 1970s when he worked in tandem with his friend Harold (Hal) Prince, one of Broadway's greatest directors who also produced many of Sondheim's musicals throughout the decade.

## Sondheim's First Venture in Underscoring

Sondheim created a work in 1966 that certainly foreshadowed his potential for writing a score for a creepy tale. He and playwright James Goldman crafted a fifty-two-minute filmed musical, *Evening Primrose*, for an ABC television series, "Stage 67." It was based on a mysterious 1961 short story by John Collier, a frequent contributor of fiction to *The New Yorker* from the 1930s to the 1950s. Several of his imaginative stories were adapted for popular television series such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1956) and *The Twilight Zone* (1960). "I've always liked John Collier stories," Goldman said, "and *Evening Primrose* had a macabre quality that appealed to Steve."<sup>1</sup> Sondheim said they settled on this "bizarre and romantic piece" as a notch above the material the ABC series had been presenting. The result was a tale—featuring Sondheim's effective underscoring—that landed "somewhere between a hallucination and a nightmare," according to biographer Meryle Secrest.<sup>2</sup>

*Evening Primrose* starred actor Anthony Perkins, a friend of Sondheim, as Charles Snell, an unhappy, idealistic poet who seeks refuge from the cold, cruel world by hiding out in a department store where a society of kindred tender spirits comes out at night. He falls in love with Ella, a young woman left behind in the store as a child by her distracted mother. She has become a prisoner of the nocturnal community. The pair try to escape but are caught by "Dark Men" who enforce the society's secret presence and transform them into store-window mannequins whom we see in the show's final moments.

*Evening Primrose* was produced six years after Perkins's star-making performance as Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a sophisticated psychological thriller that included a bloody murder and composer Bernard Herrmann's screeching score of violins, violas, and cellos. Herrmann's music intensified the iconic scene of the violent murder of Marion (Janet Leigh) in a shower. Sondheim and Perkins both loved films, so he surely knew how bloody scenes could pack a frightening emotional wallop.

*Evening Primrose* had just four songs, but Sondheim also composed a dozen instrumental melodies used for evocative accompaniment and underscoring for the compact TV musical. It was his first time to compose more than songs.

In fact, he created a moody, often frightening score for the entire story. Of course, *Evening Primrose* was much more genteel than *Sweeney Todd*, but it certainly demonstrated that Sondheim could compose music to enhance a tale's pulse-inducing terror. *Evening Primrose* was a harbinger of more sophisticated work to come a decade later.

## Moving into a Whole New Territory

In the 1970s, Sondheim and director Hal Prince embarked on a series of musicals that firmly cemented his reputation and career as a noteworthy Broadway composer and lyricist. *Company* (1970, with a book by actor and playwright George Furth) focused on a single man whose married friends were pushing him toward romantic commitment. *Follies* (1971, working again with playwright James Goldman) explored the unhappy lives of two couples who first met during extravagant Broadway shows in the 1930s and 1940s. That show featured a score full of musical pastiche, with numbers that mimicked delightful popular tunes from that era. *A Little Night Music* (1974, with a script by novelist and playwright Hugh Wheeler, who adapted Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film, *Smiles of a Summer Night*) charmed audiences with a lush, waltz-time score and a series of mismatched romantic triangles.

A lot of people didn't know quite what to make of *Pacific Overtures* (1976, Sondheim's collaboration with young playwright and historian John Weidman), which told the story of traditional nineteenth-century Japan being forced to join the modern world by American political and military dominance. These shows all stemmed from ideas brought to Sondheim by his various creative partners. But his personal predilection for emotive melodrama was about to surface.

In a *New York Times* interview in 1979 about *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim stated forthrightly that he endeavored to do something new and different with the score for each of his productions. "I try to use muscles I haven't used before. That's the fun of writing, I think. It's no fun going over territory you're familiar with. And in the process of exploration, one always learned."<sup>3</sup> Six years earlier he had stumbled on a story that would evolve into his greatest show—profoundly unlike anything he'd written before.

## Seeking Grand Guignol

Sondheim was in London in the spring of 1973 to see the first British production of his 1959 Broadway hit, *Gypsy*. Actress Angela Lansbury, who was coaxed by Sondheim into a leading role in the short-lived production of *Anyone Can Whistle* in 1964, was stepping into Ethel Merman's original role as Rose, *Gypsy*'s fearsome stage mother, singing brassy lyrics by Sondheim.

A lifelong and self-described Anglophile, Sondheim relished his visit to London and casually decided to take in a performance of a British melodrama he'd heard about. It was by Christopher Bond, a young Liverpool actor and playwright. In 1968, Bond had adapted an old melodrama script about a murderous barber named Sweeney Todd into a play that was first produced by a theater in the English Midlands. It met with enough success that it traveled to a series of regional stages. Five years later, it was produced at London's Theatre Royal, Stratford East.

Sondheim thought Bond's play might be a chance to experience "Grand Guignol," a sensational theatrical form developed by a tiny Paris theater late in the nineteenth century that specialized in graphic horror shows. Shows were inspired by horrific revenge plays from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1588), a bloody story about an ambitious Roman general who baked the heads of two of his enemy's sons into pies, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), a tragedy with a final act of terrible carnage. The Parisian shows seldom rose to the level of great drama. Rather, their most predictable elements were almost exclusively blood and gore. But the category appealed to some audiences, just as today's splatter films have followers, and Sondheim was intrigued by such material.

In fact, he had attended an evening at Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in Paris in the 1960s to see what it was like. "There were three extremely bloody one-act plays," he told interviewer Daniel Gerould in 1979.

Each had a plot at least as simple as *Oedipus*, only far less interesting, and each had one climactic, bloody, gory effect, exactly like *Oedipus*. . . . The three plays were extremely boring because, bloody as the effects were, if you were squeamish, you hardened yourself, and if you weren't squeamish, it

was just red tomato sauce and a lot of people in terrible make-up overacting. Melodrama, for me, has to be a great deal purer than that, and it has to be at least as interesting as other drama.<sup>4</sup>

Such productions might be compared to twentieth-century horror films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. These movies offer shocking violence, blood and gore, and are popular with thrill-seeking audiences but seldom provide much in the way of serious acting or aesthetic value. Sondheim, a lifelong film buff, was up for a spine-tingling evening when he headed to see a performance of Bond's *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. That wasn't exactly what he experienced at Stratford East in Newham.

Sondheim told biographer Meryle Secrest that Bond's *Sweeney* "turned out to be not Grand Guignol but this charming melodrama, and melodrama and farce are my two favorite forms of theatre because . . . they are obverse sides of the same coin."<sup>5</sup> In an introduction to the libretto of *Sweeney Todd*, Bond explained that he drew upon "Penny Dreadful" tales from the 1840s that were subsequently adapted into popular late Victorian London theatrical melodramas. These productions "possessed at least some of the essential ingredients that go to make good theater: energy and commitment crackling between the stage and the audience; involvement; passion and fun."<sup>6</sup>

## Convincing Hal Prince

Unlike their previous collaborations, Sondheim had to work hard to persuade Hal Prince to direct this one. He was moving away from producing and increasingly focused on directing. He had already achieved success staging *She Loves Me* (1963), *Baker Street* (1964), *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman* (1966), and *Zorba* (1968). *Sweeney Todd* was the first Sondheim show with the director not serving also as a producer. He did not share Sondheim's enthusiasm for melodrama and farce, as evidenced by his original productions of Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and John Kander and Fred Ebb's *Cabaret* (1966), as well as several of his earlier Sondheim shows, especially *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971).

Sondheim eventually won Prince over when the director found a way to make the story meaningful from his own point of view. “It was only when I realized that the show was about revenge,” Prince told Sondheim chronicler Craig Zadan,

that I knew how to do it. And then came the factory and the class struggle—the terrible struggle to move out of the class in which you’re born, and suddenly it became about the Industrial Age and the incursions of machinery on the spirit . . . that was very important. It made it possible for me to conceive it.<sup>7</sup>

Prince’s insight drove his decision to build a massively physical Broadway production, vastly larger and quite different from what Sondheim had imagined. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, one of the most surprising features of Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* is how it has been successfully revived in productions ranging from immense to intimate. But for its first outing, Prince pulled out all the stops.

## Seeking Help with the Script

Although Sondheim had already proved himself a genius with many facets of musical theater creation, book writing was not in his arsenal. His previous shows each had book writers who provided spoken words for each show: Arthur Laurents for *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, and *Anyone Can Whistle*, Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, George Furth for *Company*, James Goldman for *Follies*, Hugh Wheeler for *A Little Night Music*, and John Weidman for *Pacific Overtures*.

Sondheim wrote brilliant lyrics, but he had never drafted a libretto. He imagined he could simply carve out space in Bond’s script to make room for songs.

I started it, trying to write everything myself because it was really all going to be sung . . . it was going to be virtually an opera. I did the first twenty minutes, and I realized I was only on page five of Bond’s script. So at that rate, the show would possibly have been nine hours long. And I realized I didn’t know how to cut it, so Hal suggested I call Hugh [Wheeler] because

he had written mysteries, and he was British, and he would understand the tradition of the play.<sup>8</sup>

Wheeler had collaborated with Sondheim and Prince as the book writer for *A Little Night Music*. Their endeavor had been productive and pleasant, and Wheeler's involvement solved the puzzle of getting a workable script for *Sweeney Todd*.

## Melodrama and Farce

Sondheim took pains in a 1979 interview to clearly distinguish his notion of melodrama from “villains twirling mustaches and lashing young virgins to railroad tracks.” That kind of melodrama is almost always humorous. Sometimes it's a condemnation of overheated reactions: “Oh, don't be so melodramatic.” Sondheim preferred to think of melodrama as “high theater . . . the kind of theater that takes place in an auditorium with a proscenium arch . . . theater that is larger than life—in emotion, in subject, and in complication of plot.” He suggested that Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* could be considered a melodrama: “It is a mystery with a stunning surprise solution (surprising for the hero, that is), and that has a violent and bloody dramatic conclusion: Oedipus blinds himself.”<sup>9</sup>

Sondheim also expressed his love of farce, that is, satirical comedy, which he saw as the flip side of melodrama. “We find the same qualities in both,” he explained.

Complications of plot, larger-than-life characters, grand gestures, and non-naturalistic acting are common to both melodrama and farce. The only difference is that in melodrama what we could call tragic events occur, events with truly unpleasant consequences. In farce, annoying events happen with comic and generally happy consequences. . . . The point is that melodrama and farce are essentially the same form, and they represent for me the heart of the theatrical experience. . . . The theater is the one place where you can create larger than life, and melodrama and farce represent the two forms best suited to that kind of circusy quality that I love in the theater.<sup>10</sup>

Both melodrama and farce are obvious components of *Sweeney Todd*, particularly represented by the characters of Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett. The barber is generally dead serious, often maniacal (as in the song “Epiphany”), while the baker is silly and frivolous in “A Little Priest,” in which she momentarily draws Sweeney into her farcical perspective.

Sondheim was certain that melodrama would fuel the power of *Sweeney Todd*'s story. The musical is populated with larger-than-life characters, some of whom—such as the mountebank barber Pirelli—are comically exaggerated. But Sondheim's intention was to present the story seriously so it would “be taken seriously by an audience today, the way the original *Sweeney Todd* was taken seriously in the nineteenth century.”<sup>11</sup> Sondheim and Wheeler shaped *Sweeney Todd* as “theater that is larger than life, in emotion, in subject, and in complication of plot.”<sup>12</sup> Sondheim enhanced the story with musical amplification to tell Sweeney's story with heightened emotion and a complicated plot.

Sondheim wanted his version of *Sweeney Todd* to be serious about profoundly frightening people in attendance,

but not by suddenly opening doors in the dark, which can always terrify audiences and produce little shrieks of surprise, but that is not the kind of scare I am referring to. The true terror of melodrama comes from its revelations about the frightening power of what is inside human beings. And if you write about kings and queens and are a great poet, you end up with a first-class tragedy; if you write about ordinary people and are an ordinary writer, you end up with a melodrama.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Sondheim and Wheeler were far from ordinary, and the terrible, terrifying melodrama they crafted for *Sweeney Todd* pushed the story painfully close to tragedy.

## A Horror Movie?

“What I wanted to write,” he told theater chronicler Craig Zadan,

was a horror movie. The whole point of the thing is that it's a background score for a horror film, which is what I intended to do and what it is. . . . I

figured the only way to tell a horror story is to keep musical texture going, because in most horror films what really scares you, apart from the lighting and makeup, is the music. You know you don't have to see a single shark's tooth in *Jaws*: the minute the lights go down and that score starts, and you hear all those double basses, you get frightened right away.<sup>14</sup>

With the architecture of Wheeler's carefully constructed libretto, Sondheim had the perfect infrastructure for his musical horror tale.

Throughout his long life, Sondheim was a fan of films, often material well outside the commercial mainstream, cinema that was more esoteric, avant-garde, and artistic. He included several from the horror category in a set of his favorite films published in 2010, around the time of his eightieth birthday. *Dead of Night* (1945), a black-and-white British anthology of supernatural horror tales, was one he listed. But perhaps the most important example was *Hangover Square*, another film from 1945 that he saw when he was fifteen. With his friend Jamie Hammerstein (son of Sondheim's musical theater



**Figure 1.2** John Brahm's *Hangover Square*, a 1945 noir classic with a score by Bernard Herrmann, was an inspiration for Sondheim's "horror musical." 20th Century Fox/Photofest.

mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II), he attended a showing in a Times Square movie theater of the eerie melodrama set in the London gaslight era (Figure 1.2). He was so captivated by composer Bernard Herrmann's score that, after sitting through a 7:00 p.m. showing, he slipped back in at 9:00 p.m. to see it a second time so he could memorize a sheet of music from Bone's piano concerto and subsequently play it himself.

*Hangover Square* is about Henry Bone, a schizophrenic composer, driven to commit murders whenever he hears a particularly dissonant musical

chord. Director John Brahm's noir classic features a score by Herrmann, who earned his first Oscar in 1941 for Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. He subsequently composed memorable scores for Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959) and—especially pertinent to *Sweeney Todd*—the score for *Psycho* (1960). The notes that triggered Henry Bone's murderous deeds in *Hangover Square* were musical forebearers of *Sweeney Todd's* deafening factory whistle. The melodies and musical themes from Herrmann's menacing movie scores were essential cinematic elements that captivated Sondheim during his teenage years. They were also a significant inspiration for his score for *Sweeney Todd*.

As noted, Sondheim had to convince Hal Prince to direct *Sweeney Todd*. They differed both on the scale of the production and on what story the show was actually telling. "For me, what the show is really about," Sondheim said,

is obsession. I was using the story as a metaphor for any kind of obsession. Todd is a tragic hero in the classic sense that Oedipus is. He dies in the end because of a certain kind of fatal knowledge: he realizes what he has been doing. I find it terribly satisfying—much more so than any kind of accidental death, which often occurs in flimsy forms of melodrama.<sup>15</sup>

That certainly speaks to *Sweeney Todd's* tragic final scene when the barber realizes that he has murdered his long-lost wife.

Prince recognized that he and Sondheim differed on the show's message. "I think it's also about impotence, and that's quite a different matter," Prince explained. "The reason that the ensemble is used the way it is, the unifying emotion for the entire company, is shared impotence. Obviously, Sweeney's is the most dramatic, to justify all those murders. Impotence creates rage, and rage is what is expressed most by Sweeney's behavior."<sup>16</sup> While Sondheim's and Prince's perspectives diverged, they staged a show that still resonates—and induces fear and horror—more than a half-century later.

*Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street: A Musical Thriller* is perhaps one of the greatest works of onstage horror, comedy, and tragedy—a strange, fascinating, and, yes, bloody stew. In 2021, blogger Graham Skipper put it succinctly: "For us horror fans, there is no more seismic moment in horror theatre than *Sweeney Todd*. It is bold, daring, dangerous theatre, both

fun and frightening, entertaining and introspective. There is truly nothing else like it, nor will there ever be.<sup>17</sup>

Before digging into Sondheim and Wheeler's creation from Christopher Bond's stage script, it's important to explore the roots of this frightening legend as well as its existence as a creepy nineteenth-century publishing phenomenon and subsequently a horrifying stage show. All these elements converged to cement the terrifying tale of *Sweeney Todd* in the psyches of superstitious Brits and to lay a firm, if bloody, foundation for Sondheim's masterpiece.

## 2

# *Sweeney's Bloody Roots*

A frequently asked question about the story of Sweeney Todd is whether there was a real person of that name who perpetrated horrifying crimes and inspired these frightening tales. The simple answer is no. But plenty of bloody threads from horror stories wove their way together across several centuries before they became a sensational print version in the 1840s, the catalyst for another century of terrifying storytelling.

Very possibly the earliest published account of a murderous barber dates from the thirteenth century, 1206, in Paris. He was said to have killed his customers and transported them from his cellar to a nearby pastry shop where they were ground up for meat pies. A house named “Marmousets” (a French word meaning a “grotesque figurine”) on Paris’s Île de la Cité was on a street that still bears that identification today. The name was surely a hint that dark deeds happened there. As the story goes, once authorities discovered the home of the barber and his partner the pastry maker, he was arrested and executed. The house where these ghastly crimes occurred was demolished, replaced by a small memorial shaped like a pyramid. (The shop of the pastry maker was said to have been on the corner of the Rue des Deux Hermites.) The barber shop’s lot was said to remain vacant for many years out of fear and respect. Finally, in 1536, King Francis I was said to have granted permission for a house to be built on the site.

During an era when literacy was a rare skill, oral storytelling perpetuated similar stories, tales that were repeatedly embellished and expanded. Such narratives especially focused on monsters, ogres, trolls, and other evil beings.

In 1598 a French tailor from Châlons was sentenced to be burned alive by the Parliament of Paris after he was charged with “lycanthropy,” a belief that he could transform himself into a wolf or some other nonhuman animal. He had reportedly drawn children into his shop or attacked them in a nearby forest, torn them with his teeth, then dressed their remains and eaten them. An incriminating barrel of bones was reportedly found in his shop.

Centuries later a similar story from Polomia in southern Poland described an impoverished beggar who killed and ate fourteen children. His behavior was said to have been triggered when a jail caught fire and burned down, roasting one of the prisoners. The starving beggar happened by and could not resist the temptation of making a meal of the charred body. He developed an irresistible craving for human flesh, including a nine-year-old orphan girl. He too was discovered and punished. Stories like these were easily heard, repeated, and used as cautionary warnings to wayward children.

Much in the same way that ghost stories get retold, exaggerated, enlarged upon, and believed, the tale of the Rue de Marmousets evolved from the thirteenth century and continued to flourish—and frighten people—for centuries, as recorded in Jacques du Breuil's *La Théâtre des Antiquités de Paris* in 1612:

Since time out of mind, it has been rumoured abroad that there was once in the city of Paris, on the Rue des Marmousets, a murderous pastry-cook who killed a certain man in his house; he was helped in doing so by a neighbour of his—a barber—who slit the man's throat while shaving him. From the flesh of this man they made meat pies that were found to be better than all others, insofar as human flesh is more tender, because of its diet, than that of other animals. And the murderer having been discovered, the parliamentary court ordered that in addition to the punishment of the pastry-cook, his house be razed to the ground and that a pyramid or pillar be built on the site in its place, in shameful memory of this disgraceful fact—a part of which aforesaid stands to this day in the rue des Marmousets.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Mårtensson Lindeström, a seventeenth-century Swedish artist, cartographer, and engineer, left a manuscript at the time of his death in 1691 that reported on his travels in 1654 to North America. His manuscript

(unpublished until 1925) contained a story he claimed to have heard from merchants and residents of Calais, France, when he passed through that port. It closely resembled the tales of other crimes perpetrated by a vicious barber and a pastry maker, suggesting that the root story of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett is an archetypal and legendary one.

The seedy Parisian neighborhood of the Rue de Marmousets was a place of narrow alleys and rotting tenements, the sort of locale where wicked things were likely to happen. It was a setting for numerous fearsome stories written during the following centuries. The street name in the story shifted to an adjacent—but equally dismal—street, the locale for “A terrific story of the Rue de la Harpe, Paris,” in a very similar narrative published in 1824 in *The Tell-Tale*, a weekly London magazine that provided a constant stream of sensational narratives. So popular was the story that, in the days before copyright laws provided some legal restraint, it appeared in another London publication, the *New Wonderful and Entertaining Magazine*, in 1825 bearing the title “The Murderous Barber.”

## Sweeney Swings His Razors in London

Quite naturally some of these stories crossed from continental Europe to England. London, where the population doubled in the late eighteenth century from 750,000 in 1780 to 1.4 million by 1815, was the perfect breeding ground for such salacious tales. Rampant poverty and unemployment, particularly in the blocks surrounding Fleet Street, meant violence, disorder, and brutal punishment were commonplace. The profusion of taverns and alcohol encouraged increased lawlessness, and the environs, replete with byways, alleys, and tunnels, provided hiding places and escape routes for criminals.

People lived in extreme, overcrowded tenements with shabby, sparse furniture and little clothing aside from what they wore day in and day out. Violence was rife, and the exploits of felons, their crimes, and their executions were constantly and breathlessly reported in the press and the literature of the era. These fed into even more sensational stories, particularly focused on individuals, even adolescent children, often sentenced for largely inconsequential crimes to time in prisons such as the massive grim fortress

of Newgate. More than 200 crimes were punishable by hanging, including simple acts of petty theft such as picking pockets or stealing small items from a shop. Wealthier Londoners paid to enter the filthy, disease-ridden Newgate to stare at criminals in their cells. (One such visitor, author Charles Dickens, was inspired to write about child pickpockets in his novel *Oliver Twist* in the 1830s.)

Newgate had at least one prisoner who reportedly had been a barber. From the dank halls and cells he was said to have served affluent inmates in need of grooming and medical assistance. Barbers in this era often were both hairdressers and primitive, untrained surgeons, addressing minor bodily complaints and injuries—ranging from harshly extracting a decayed tooth or amputating a gangrenous arm or a leg. (From medieval times the red-stripped pole that still serves as a symbol of a barber shop was inspired by flowing blood or bloody bandages that resulted from bloodletting.)

Newgate became a regular source of ghastly information, *The Newgate Calendar; or, Malefactor's Bloody Register*, first published in the early 1700s by the prison's keeper as a bulletin of executions. By the mid-eighteenth century it was appropriated by other publishers of sensational materials; it lasted for more than a century. Over its long existence *The Newgate Calendar* likely published more than a thousand cases. It reached countless eighteenth-century British homes, outnumbered only by copies of the Bible and John Bunyan's Christian allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).

A forerunner of nineteenth-century crime fiction and today's scandalous tabloids, one of *The Newgate Calendar's* most prominent publishers was J. Cooke, a crafty entrepreneur, who featured "Genuine and Circumstantial Narratives of the Lives and Transactions, Various Exploits and Dying Speeches of the Most Notorious Criminals of Both Sexes." Employing tiny type in double columns on cheap paper, these publications typically featured lurid drawings of a crime on the front page, intended to draw readers into the gruesome stories of robbery, forgery, and murder on the following pages.

Such publications perpetuated myths about urban cannibalism. Perhaps the most sensational product was an 1844 novel *Sawney Bean: The Man-Eater of Midlothian*. The legendary sixteenth-century figure, Alexander "Sawney" Bean, was supposedly the scion of a forty-five-member clan in Scotland that

murdered and cannibalized more than 1,000 people over a quarter-century. The tale allies Bean with Black Agnes Douglas, a vicious woman often accused of being a witch. According to tall tales of their early crimes, they took shelter in a deep coastal cave in Scotland, where—married or not—they spawned six daughters, eight sons, fourteen granddaughters, and eighteen grandsons, all said to be the products of incest.

The infamous clan supposedly ambushed people at night and brought bodies back to the cave where they were butchered, roasted, eaten, and sometimes pickled. Eventually public outcry supposedly caused the king of Scotland to send a posse to hunt them down. By some accounts Bean and his family were captured and gruesomely executed; by others they were trapped in the cave by detonated gunpowder, which suffocated them. There is no hard evidence of Sawney Bean's existence, but stories of his grim crimes were recycled over the years. A prominent example is S. R. Crockett's *The Grey Man*, a popular novel, published in 1896. Sawney Bean's name might have been at least an inspiration for the nefarious Sweeney Todd.

In late December 1784 an article appeared in *the Annual Register*, a respected London publication edited by statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke. He wrote and published this reputable reference work annually, reliably reporting the year's major events, developments, and trends. The article was titled, "A Barbarous Barber."

A most remarkable murder was perpetrated in the following manner by a journeyman barber that lived near Hyde Park Corner, who had been jealous of his wife, but could in no way bring this home to her. A young gentleman, by chance coming into the barber's shop to be shaved and dressed, and being in liquor, mentioned having seen a fine girl in Hamilton Street, from whom he had had certain favours the night before, and at the same time describing her person. The barber, concluding this to be his wife, and in the height of his frenzy, cut the young gentleman's throat from ear to ear and absconded.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the perpetrator being unidentified, this incident, first reported in the *London Chronicle* (December 2, 1784), was subsequently incorporated into many accounts purporting to be about the "real" Sweeney Todd. Scholar

Robert L. Mack commented, “The persistent search for the ‘genuine’ historical incidents that inspired the narrative of Sweeney Todd suggests that at least on some level there is part of our collective psyche that actually wants or even needs his story to be true; to have it reduced to a mere fiction among other fictions would somehow detract from its aura.”<sup>3</sup>

A claim in a popular pamphlet published by James Catnach in 1818 offers another example. His cheaply produced chapbooks and broadsheets at first offered British nursery rhymes and fairy tales. But early in the nineteenth century he expanded his focus to the equivalent of today’s “fake news”—using rumor and innuendo to boost his circulation. On June 1, 1818, he issued a libelous handbill titled “A Number of Human Bodies Found in the Shop of a Port Butcher” that said Thomas Pizzey, a butcher on London’s Drury Lane, had been selling pork sausages actually stuffed with human flesh. Catnach’s scandalous account provoked hysteria:

We have just been informed of a most dreadful and horrible discovery revolting to every feeling of humanity and calculated to inspire sentiments of horror and disgust in the minds of every individual. . . . Great flocks of people were assembled from all parts of the town at Marlborough Street in expectation of the offender having a hearing.<sup>4</sup>

The butcher sued Catnach for his malicious libel, and the printer was sentenced to a six-month stay in a house of correction. Such unfounded stories circulated easily and frequently. One that made its way into more serious literature appeared in Charles Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). The character Tom Pinch wonders whether his friend is

afraid I have strayed into one of those streets where the countrymen are murdered; and that I have been made meat-pies of, or some horrible thing. . . . Tom’s evil genius did not lead him into the dens of any of those preparers of cannibalistic pastry, who are represented in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail business in the Metropolis.<sup>5</sup>

London’s gullible, lower-class population was rife with fears and anxieties, but also had a voracious appetite for shocking true crime stories. Cheaply published eight-page broadsides, generally referred to as “Penny Dreadfuls”

or “Penny Bloods”—because they were sold for just a penny—were stuffed with overheated accounts of horrifying crimes. Once read, such tales were certainly repeated by word of mouth and exaggerated even further. They built upon one another creating an undertow of belief and an opportunity for an ever-increasing stream of sensational publications, the nineteenth-century predecessors of today’s supermarket tabloids.

## Edward Lloyd’s Salisbury Square and Penny Dreadful Tales

This historic stew of obscure horror tales, known murderers, folklore and the very human fear of cannibalism formed the foundation of a sensational publishing series by Edward Lloyd (1815–90), probably the most influential publisher of such items starting in the 1830s. These were cheaply produced serial literature about the exploits of detectives, criminals, and supernatural beings. By the 1850s there were as many as 100 publishers of such horror fiction, typically released in weekly editions of eight to sixteen pages and sold for a penny. The principal content was usually bloodthirsty tales of vampires, pirates, highwaymen, and murderers.

Lloyd was the third son of an impoverished family; his father declared bankruptcy several times. Lloyd left school at the age of fourteen and quickly found his way to a lifelong career in printing. Growing up during the Industrial Revolution, he was fascinated with inventions and machinery. He recognized that people living in poverty could improve their lives by learning to read, so he initially printed inexpensive educational items such as cards and songs. In 1832 he launched the *Weekly Penny Comic Magazine*. By 1835, at the age of twenty, he established his own print shop with presses.

The growth of literacy caused a growing demand for written works, especially for entertaining and affordable reading material. Women were important customers, so Lloyd’s publications, at first, needed to be decent and morally sound. As he sought steadier revenue, he began to print serialized romantic fiction. He launched several periodicals: *People’s Periodical and Family Library*, *Lloyd’s Entertaining Journal*, and *Lloyd’s Penny Weekly Miscellany of Romance and General Interest*.

The content of his publications was far from intellectual and seldom original. He often appropriated other people's good ideas. Adopting familiar plots wholesale in an era when copyright laws were largely nonexistent, Lloyd's retellings were eagerly consumed by readers. Plagiarism was the order of the day for such publishers. He had considerable success with slightly adapted knockoffs of novels by Charles Dickens with minimally changed titles: *The Penny Pickwick*, *Oliver Twiss*, and *Nickelas Nickleberry*. His *Pickwick* issue was a bestseller: roughly 50,000 copies were snapped up at a penny each—rather than Dickens's own novels, which cost considerably more. (The Parliamentary Copyright Act of 1842, championed by Dickens, significantly reduced the rampant plagiarism by Lloyd and others.)

If a romance cranked out by one of his stable of Salisbury Square freelance writers failed to sell, Lloyd simply had the writer conclude it quickly and move on another far-fetched tale. Starting in the 1830s and continuing until the early 1850s, he published roughly 200 romances, extravagant tales of love and adventure. He had pool of engravers who created sensational, graphic

woodcuts (Figure 2.1) to illustrate tales written by his corps of authors, men often paid by the line or by the page. In particular, he frequently employed James Malcolm Rymer (1814–84) and Thomas Peckett Prest (1810–59).



**Figure 2.1** “*Penny Dreadful*” publications in the 1840s and 1850s featured sensational graphic woodcuts, such as this one depicting Sweeney Todd slashing a throat. A historic woodcut illustration.

## The String of Pearls

*The String of Pearls: A Domestic Romance* first appeared in *The People's Periodical and Family Library*, Lloyd's most memorable serialization, published in eighteen weekly installments from November 21, 1846, to March 20, 1847. (It was subsequently retitled *The String of Pearls: A Sailor's Gift*, and in a later “collected” version subtitled *The Barber*