
Sweeney Todd: A Brief Introduction by Neil Gaiman

Whether there be really any gradation in Crimes, or whether we do not mistake in supposing the transgression of one Law of God more heinous than that of another, would be a Point too difficult and too abstract for us to enter into, but as Human Nature is more shocked at the shedding of Blood than at any other Offence, we may be allowed to treat those who are guilty of it as bloody and unnatural Men, who besides their losing all respect towards the Laws of God, show also a want of that compassion and tenderness which seems incident to the Human Species.

Anonymous, Lives of the Criminals (1735)

Lupin: And wilt meet me at twelve o'clock near Temple Bar? For the work of the Lord calleth his servant and I must begone.

George Dildin Pitt, The String of Pearls; or The Fiend of Fleet Street (1842, or 1847.)



Temple Bar 1879

Fleet Street, in the City of London, is by tradition the location of the story of Sweeney Todd, commonly known as the Demon Barber.

The entrance to Fleet Street was signified for many years by Temple Bar, a Christopher Wren arch, built in 1670 on the site of previous gates, the first of which was probably erected four hundred years before by the Knights Templar; and the entrance to Fleet Street is the entrance to the City of London, that anomalous city within a city.

Temple Bar still exists, although it is no longer in London. You may see it if you wish, although barbed wire discourages those who might approach too close.





Sweeney Todd is about Manners, and Mirrors, and Meat. It's about razors, and women, and men. It's about death, and about London.

It's about the past, and about the legacy from the past that we carry with us forever.

You never know what you'll find when you go looking for something. *Sweeney Todd* began for us as a small, elegant chance to retell a familiar tale, and has grown and shifted with each new jigsaw piece until now it squats monstrous and dark and still, waiting to be told.



It is said that at the moment when Sweeney Todd was hurled from the ladder the ruins of his shop in Fleet Street fell with a thundering crash, and that the dust and ashes hovering in the air took the form of a huge gibbet, with the figure of a man suspended upon it.

Be that so or not, the charred ruins were soon carted away, and another house built upon the site of the place where so many awful cruelties had been perpetrated.

Other buildings were pulled down and rebuilt, and people began to be in error as to the exact spot where Sweeney Todd's shop really stood, and as years went on the villain's name became spoken of merely as a legendary person.

But he lived, as the *Newgate Calendar* of the time testifies.

There is also a full-length portrait still in existence, depicting him in his shop, with its old wig blocks and racks of razors.

Frederick Hazleton, *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, novel (1862)



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wenny Todd is the story of a barber who was a very bad man (although, in most versions of the tale, a very good barber). It is safe to say that the tale gained wide prominence in Victorian England during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and that two early popularisers of the tale were playwright George Dibdin Pitt (1799-1853) and an unknown author of *Penny Dreadfuls* – the generic name for much Victorian periodical literature: blood and thunder tales, price one penny.



It is possible that the tale of Sweeney Todd may have been around for longer than that, as an oral tale or a folk-song. It may even have been based on a true story (there are rumours, and perhaps more than rumours).

Thomas Peckett Prest (1810-1879) may well have written some of the first *Sweeney Todd Penny Dreadful*, published by Edward Lloyd in his *People's Periodical and Family Library* in 1846 and 1847. (There is also a tradition that the work was begun by one George MacFarren, who had written the first few chapters before he turned the serial over to Prest because of failing eyesight. None of those portions of *The String of Pearls* that I have read, read [in my opinion] like other works that are reliably attributed to Prest, but attribution of authorship in the world of cheap Victorian literature is, at best, more than a little dodgy.) The first *Penny Dreadful*, written or not by Prest, was serialised over 18 issues, and was called *The String of Pearls; or the Sailor's Gift. A Romance of Peculiar Interest*.

George Dibdin Pitt was a playwright who wrote a play, with or without Prest, either based on the *Penny Dreadful* or soon to be plagiarised by it, featuring the terrible Mr Todd, first performed some time in the 1840s (accounts differ), under the title *The String of Pearls or the Fiend of Fleet Street*; although the title changed over the next ten years, as the fiend of Fleet Street took his rightful place at the head of the title.

The men of the eighteenth century who were used to these things, who made no protest when Ann Martin in 1761 was sentenced to a mere two years for putting out her children's eyes and going a-begging with them (that at a time when men were being hanged for stealing sheep) – they had their *Beggar's Opera* and their *Prison Breakers* and they laughed: we, who cannot believe a word of it, laugh too. The Victorians wept, and believed everything they were sold.

Montagu Slater. Introduction to 1928 reissue of George Dibdin Pitt's *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.





Sweeney's fame over the next forty years was spread through the medium of the theatre. Many different versions of the play were written and performed during this period, almost all of which have been lost to us.

Frederick Hazleton was the author of one of these plays, first performed about 1862, which while based on Dibdin Pitt's play introduced a number of new elements. Hazleton himself novelised his play; published in 1862 by George Vickers, "For Sale in Bookshops, Newsagents and Theatres," it was priced at one penny. (This is the only Victorian version of the tale to have been reprinted in its entirety in recent times; it was reissued with a lengthy introduction by Peter Haining by W.H. Allen in 1980.)

In the 1890s a new penny dreadful appeared, far longer than the original, published by Charles Fox and Co.: *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. It took elements from the plays and the original penny dreadful, extensively plagiarised the Hazleton Novelisation, and expanded the whole out (occasionally slightly desperately) to 576 closely-typed double-columned pages of story - 12 pages a month for two years; a 48-part story.

Peter Haining reports another anonymous Charles Fox publication, *The Romance of Newgate* (1884), a reprinted collection of lives of criminals imprisoned in Newgate prison, which contains a brief, undated entry about one Sweeney Todd, a Fleet Street barber, who had been arrested on "the serious charges now being investigated," but gives no further details.

Also in the 1880s another penny dreadful, *Boy's Standard*, retold the story of Sweeney Todd in *The Link Boys of Old London - Mrs Lovett*. Sweeney's accomplice, has become Mrs Darkman, but otherwise the story is similar, although perhaps more inventively grisly than the others.

