Class, Crime, and Cannibalism in *The String of Pearls*; or, The Demon Barber as Bourgeois Bogeyman

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Abstract

Although the tale of Sweeney Todd is one with significant cultural resonance, little has been written about the text itself, *The String of Pearls*. This article argues that the text engages with anxieties about class conflict through a narrative that enacts exaggerated versions of various interactions. In the nineteenth century, critics objected to the cheap fiction pejoratively known as penny dreadfuls, asserting that the genre's exciting tales of bloodshed, villainy, and mayhem would seduce readers to lives of debauchery and crime, but I argue that this concern about cheap fiction was not for the preservation of the souls of the poor and working classes but rather for the preservation of the middle classes' own corporeal bodies and the system that privileged and protected them. While there is no question that the narrative enacts extreme manifestations of problems facing the urban poor—among them, contaminated or even poisonous foodstuffs and the perils of urban anonymity—it also features an intractable and rapacious lower class and a subversion of the master-servant dynamic on which the comforts of the middle class were constructed, and so, in addition to adventure, detection, and young love, *The String of Pearls* offers a dark revenge fantasy of class-based violence that the middle-class critics of the penny dreadful were perhaps justified in fearing. tl;dr: Eat the Rich!

Keywords

Cannibalism, capitalism, hungry 40s, middle-class panics, penny dreadfuls, Sweeney Todd

In 1874, James Greenwood, a social journalist in the tradition of Henry Mayhew and Jacob Riis, wrote that '[t]here is a *plague* that is striking . . . into English soil—chiefly metropolitan . . . tempting the ignorant and unwary, and breeding death and misery unspeakable,' a plague the 'baleful influence' of which he argues is ignored because it is 'confined to the vulgar ground it is indigenous to . . . [and is] easy to avoid' (1874, p. 158). The subject of his concern, however, was not poverty, exploitative capitalist practices, alcoholism, or any of the actual diseases that could flourish in overcrowded poor and working-class communities. His target was, instead, 'the plague of poisonous literature' (p. 158) that the proliferation of cheap print publications had generated, and his overwrought polemic, 'A Short Way to Newgate,' quotes and paraphrases from a selection of penny dreadfuls, cataloging for his middle-class readers in minute detail and through a profusion of mixed metaphors the dangers of such entertainment to the poor and working classes to whom they were marketed.

Middle-class moral panics have long been a commonplace phenomenon. John Springhall, writing about the penny dreadful, begins by noting that ''Respectability' was a virtue much sought after by a large majority of Victorians, if we exclude those at the highest and lowest levels of the social hierarchy'

(2001, p. 160); that is, what is popularly identified as 'Victorian' morality was almost exclusively the objective of the middle class. Deeply invested in maintaining the status quo from which they derive their power, the middle class have historically taken upon themselves the role of arbiters of morality and good taste, policing the sources of entertainment for the poor and working classes in the interest of control for as long as the notions of 'high' and 'low' culture have existed. In the nineteenth century, critics objected to the cheap fiction pejoratively known as penny bloods or penny dreadfuls, [1] with journalist Eliza Meteyard railing in 1847 against 'a most polluted source of evil, viz., that heap of abomination and trash falsely denominated 'cheap literature'' (cited in Haywood 2004, p. 165), asserting that the genre's exciting tales of bloodshed, villainy, and mayhem would seduce readers to lives of debauchery and crime. I would argue, however, that their concern about cheap fiction was not for preservation of the souls of the poor and working classes but rather for the preservation of their own corporeal bodies and the system that privileged and protected them; it was concern for their own safety, wrapped in a mantle of concern for the exploited, which motivated the discourse against cheap, sensational fiction. After all, if readers were to turn to the life of crime that penny dreadfuls 'glamorized,' whom would these criminals target?

Additionally, because penny dreadfuls are set in the world occupied by their poor and working-class audiences and represent exaggerated manifestations of this audience's anxieties and the injustices that perpetuate them, these narratives may offer more than escapist fantasy—they may offer, if not a path to escape from a life of exploitation, the very real impetus to do so. The general premise that reading penny fiction will lead to a life of crime is clearly fallacious, denying as it does the poor and working classes the moral or intellectual capacity to distinguish between fiction and real life or to make decisions about right and wrong. However, when one considers that the life of crime portrayed in so many penny dreadfuls has the same objectives, on a personal level, as a revolution—improved circumstances and a shift in the balance of power—the middle-class panic about the impact of penny dreadfuls perhaps becomes more understandable: in the context of the mid-nineteenth century sociopolitical environment, when the fiction of an inversion of power is consumed, the oppressed might find their revolutionary appetites whetted, whether on a personal/domestic or on a broader, public scale.

[1] Most sources suggest that the name 'penny blood' was applied earlier in the nineteenth century than 'penny dreadful,' although the *OED* does not support this. I will bow to convention and the mellifluous and use 'penny dreadful' in describing *The String of Pearls,* the publication of which falls roughly on the border between the two terms.
For more on the middle-class frenzy over the cheap, popular fiction of the nineteenth century, see for example Curt Herr's introductory essay to his edition of *Varney the Vampire* (Zittaw Press, 2007) and Springhall's work, including 'The Mysteries of Midnight: Low-Life London 'Penny Dreadfuls' as Unrespectable Reading from the 1860s,' cited in this essay; ''A Life Story for the People'? Edwin J. Brett and the London 'Low-Life' Penny Dreadfuls of the 1860s,' *Victorian Studies,* 33.2, 1990, pp. 223-246; and *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (St. Martin's Press, 1999). See also Edward Jacobs, 'Devaluing the Popular: London Street Culture, 'Industrial Literacy,' and the Emergence of Mass Culture in Victorian England,' *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth-Century City and Its Contexts,* ed. by Debra Mancoff and D.J. Trela (Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 89-113, and Mark Bennett, 'Generic Gothic and Unsettling Genre: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the Penny Blood,' *Gothic Studies,* 13.1, 2011, pp. 38-54. All of these arguments owe much to Richard Altick, whose *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murders and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (Norton, 1970) examines the Victorian zest for bloodshed, and to Patrick Dunae, whose article 'Penny Dreadfuls: Late Nineteenth-Century Boys' Literature and Crime' (*Victorian Studies,* 22.2, 1979, pp. 133-150) firmly grounds the outrage not in morality but in fear. For more on this fear, see Ian Haywood's *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics, and the People, 1790-1860,* also cited in this essay, specifically Chapters 6-9 and their consideration of the 1840s; Iain McCalman's *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge UP, 1988) examines the sociopolitical underground from which the radical politics of the 1840s sprang.

The 1840s and Popular Literature

The anonymously authored narrative *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, popularly known as *Sweeney Todd*,[2] is a frequently graphic assault on both good taste and the status quo. *The String of Pearls* isn't a very good book, but its story has endured even as the original text has fallen almost entirely out of circulation: rewritten more than once and, most famously, set to music, the original tale was published serially during the period known as the Hungry 40s, when widespread industrialization and attendant overcrowded urbanization, coupled with agrarian blight, contributed to conditions that culminated in the revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe. Where there was no revolution, there were shilling weeklies, no less radical than more assertively political publications even as they foregrounded sensational fiction and romances rather than current events; Ian Haywood considers these publications of the 1840s in the final section of *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics, and the People, 1790-1860*, writing that what he facetiously calls '[t]he displaced, secular, amoral working class . . . was being provided with a boundless supply of (literally) cheap thrills' (2004, p. 139) before moving on to 'historicize radical and popular texts by relating them to the ongoing public debate about 'cheap' literature, and to the continuing campaign for radical political reform' (p. 141).

Arguing that 'the literary history of the 1840s needs rewriting from the bottom up' to acknowledge the role of fiction published in cheap, popular periodicals in the growing consciousness of the oppressed poor and working classes (p. 141), Haywood says that 'Chartism produced the first, genuinely working-class fiction by assimilating both popular and polite narrative forms and modifying their corresponding social and moral values' (p. 145) but that, for the most part, radical authors and publishers 'were unwilling, unable or reluctant to preach an openly insurrectionist message' (p. 149), leading to 'the pragmatic imbrication of the radical press and popular fiction' (p. 161) exemplified in the careers of two publishers whose careers he considers in detail, George W. M. Reynolds and Edward Lloyd.[3] It was in Lloyd's *The People's Periodical and Family Library*—a politically moderate shilling weekly marketed to the increasingly literate poor and working classes and 'yok[ing] together radical tradition and the important new cultural terrain of family reading' (p. 168)—that *The String of Pearls* was originally serialized in 1846-1847.

The String of Pearls is the story of a money-hungry barber who robs and murders his wealthy customers and cleans up after his crimes by sending the bodies to his neighbor to bake into meat pies, which she sells to a wide range of customers, an ideal representation of Haywood's 'proletarianisation of literary production . . . matched by radical shifts in the class relations of the characters' (p. 163).

[2] I am using the 2007 Oxford University Press edition of the original serial publication, edited by Robert Mack and published under the title of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. I will identify this text as *The String of Pearls* to differentiate it from the Stephen Sondheim musical of the same name; all citations are to this edition.
The authorship of the original periodical serial is still a subject of debate, but it seems most likely that it was some sort of collaboration between prolific hack writers James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest, who both wrote for Lloyd, with additional contributions throughout its series of publications by other authors in Lloyd's employ; Mack favors attributing primary authorship to Rymer in his introduction to the above-named edition but is less absolute in *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd* wherein he discusses in more detail the question of authorship (2007, pp. 145-148). Other textual scholars develop compelling counterarguments. Rosalind Crone and Sally Powell, for example, both attribute the novel to Prest. Luckily, it doesn't actually matter.
The serial was adapted for the stage by George Dibdin Pitt, expanded for subsequent serial publication under Lloyd, published in novel form, and stolen for American publication. I have not yet developed the strength of character, nor would it fit within the scope of this essay, to do a full analysis of the changes between editions.

[3] See Haywood, Chapter 7, 'Fathers of the cheap press or 'able speculators'? Edward Lloyd and George W. M. Reynolds,' pp. 162-191.

There is also a love story, some domestic comedy, an asylum subplot, and a dash of imperialist adventure, but at its core, *The String of Pearls* is an exploration of very real anxieties about the rapidly growing urban industrial city of the mid-nineteenth century. This narrative of a murderous barber and an unscrupulous pie shop owner is very different from the romanticized version that dominates contemporary popular culture: it is an over-the-top conspiracy plot influenced by the gothic and Newgate novels that preceded it, but the tale also embodies the upheavals of the Hungry 40s, the decade of *The Communist Manifesto*, Chartism, the Great Famine in Ireland, and legislative changes to long-standing systems of oppression.[4] There is no question that the narrative enacts extreme manifestations of problems facing the urban poor—among them, contaminated or even poisonous foodstuffs and the perils of urban anonymity—but the anxieties of the poor and working classes are not the only ones with which the novel engages; the main characters represent a working class that subverts the master-servant dynamic on which the comforts of the middle class were constructed. The narrative does not merely draw upon experiences with which its readers could relate to develop its plot; by providing a fantastic vision of a class war and by condemning whole-cloth, through its narrative emphasis on a specific population who consumed human flesh, those who exploit the poor and working classes, *The String of Pearls* becomes a novel about large-scale class conflicts—the threat of which loomed large in the imaginations of the middle class in the 1840s—albeit one in which the messages are frequently as garbled as the narrative. In addition to adventure, detection, and young love, *The String of Pearls* offers a dark revenge fantasy of class-based violence, ‘‘popular leisure’ [that] still retain[ed] radical political affiliations’ (Haywood 2004, p. 164).

Sweeney Todd and the Scholars

Although the story of Sweeney Todd is widely known, little critical attention has been paid to *The String of Pearls* outside the realm of surveys of cheap fiction. The most significant contributions are those from Robert Mack, whose *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, a book-length study of the contexts of the novel that considers the place of Sweeney Todd in histories of cannibalism, urbanization, crime, popular fiction, and urban legends, was published in 2007, the same year that Oxford University Press published his annotated edition of the novel as a tie-in to the movie that it does not resemble. Mack’s study of the novel is an invaluable complement to any scholarly consideration of *The String of Pearls*, but as his subtitle, *The Life and Times of an Urban Legend*, suggests, he is more interested in the origins of the characters within urban legend and how that character has changed in the last two centuries rather than within the sociopolitical upheavals of the time; this is not to say that Mack and I do not consider some of the same points in similar ways, but he sees the novel as a part of the legend of Sweeney Todd, a legend that continued to develop from the earliest stage adaptations through to Stephen Sondheim’s musical and Tim Burton’s movie to become a completely different figure, one driven by revenge rather than greed and looking more like Johnny Depp than Shockheaded Peter.

Kristen Guest writes about the sociopolitical significance of cannibalism in the first of these adaptations, the 1847 melodrama loosely based on the serial, saying that the play and its source, unlike the earlier ‘moral fables’ of murderous barbers and questionable pies, interrogates ‘an existing political

[4] The opening pages of *The String of Pearls* place the events of the novel in 1785, ‘[b]efore Fleet-street had reached its present importance, and when George the Third was young, and the two figures who used to strike the chimes at old St Dunstan’s church were in all their glory’ (p. 3); although Sue Zemka notes that the statues and clock had been moved to Regent’s Park and the original St. Dunstan’s torn down by the 1840s in *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* (Cambridge UP, 2012, p. 93), this reference places the novel more firmly in place than it does in time, as George III was 47 in 1785:this detail serves to emphasize that the novel is about the period in which it was written rather than about an imagined past.

hierarchy' instead of reinforcing it (2001, p. 114), which she connects to the ambivalence exhibited by a middle class desiring to both demonize and assimilate the lower classes. All of the consumers, she argues, are 'inadvertent cannibal[s],' 'victim[s] of a vicious system of consumerism that knowingly sets out to deceive,' that is, a 'treacherous shopkeeper' and his 'capitalistic greed' (p. 118). Thus, cannibalism in *The String of Pearls* is an act committed not by one class against another but by a heterogeneous customer base against itself.[5]

Rosalind Crone traces the evolution of the cannibalistic mass murderer from the rural Sawney Beane to the urban Sweeney Todd (both of whom she identifies, while acknowledging the anachronism, as serial killers), arguing that the shift reflects both the declining social status of audiences for these tales and the move from pre-industrial to early Victorian industrial capitalism, a theme which she says 'was nothing new' in cheap fiction (2010, p. 70). However, her focus is on the literal 'murder machines,' Todd's custom-designed chair—a *de rigueur* prop in any stage production of the story—that pitches his victims into a cellar where he slits the throats of those whose necks don't break and, by extension, Mrs. Lovett's elaborate pie-baking mechanisms that allow one baker, a prisoner in her basement, to bake dozens of pies at once and deliver them to her shop upstairs. Crone considers almost exclusively the combined threats to the poor and working classes of urban anonymity and the various machines, literal and figurative, of industrial capitalism, arguing that Sweeney Todd is a product of his time, a mass murderer whose crimes 'formed a frightening parallel with the condition of the faceless, poor, urban mass' (p. 74).

Crone's argument builds on Sally Powell's article on the disposal of and commodification of corpses in mid-nineteenth century London, which draws on Sweeney Todd as well as on resurrection men in fact and fiction to develop her argument about corpse-related markets. Like Crone, Powell limits her analysis to the 'mid-century *working-class* anxiety in relation to retail, production[,] and consumption' of 'the human corpse as product' (2004, p. 48, emphasis added). Thus, while these several critics have engaged with the issues of poverty and class conflict within and around the novel, it is my hope that the present consideration of *The String of Pearls* as not just a critique favoring the poor and working classes but as, if not precisely a call to eat the rich, at least a cause for their discomfort will enrich the discussions around the novel.

The Crimes of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett

It would be foolish to ignore the significance of cannibalism within *The String of Pearls*, which I will later explore in more detail. However, there is more to the crimes of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber, and Mrs. Lovett, his accomplice, than just suborning customers into consuming human flesh, and an examination of these topics will provide a foundation for my reading of the novel's specific uses of cannibalism, facilitated by murder, in relation to anxieties about class destabilization. Firstly, there is its interrogation of and engagement with capitalism: Todd is the consummate capitalist in his adherence to the time-honored traditions of blood, dishonesty, and theft, motivated purely by greed. He wants money, he kills his wealthy middle- and upper-class customers in order to rob them, and he has to do something with the bodies afterwards. He turns the bodies of his victims over to Mrs. Lovett in the interest of self-preservation: while he could, perhaps, have turned his victims over to medical students as killers like Burke and Hare did, he instead provides Mrs. Lovett with the meat for her delectable pies. He is a middle man, providing a vital commodity for making a consumable product

[5] As the plots of the print and stage version diverge in significant ways, Guest's excellent reading of the class tensions present in the melodrama is only peripherally useful to the present argument, but I greatly appreciate her interrogation of equally permeable class attributes and boundaries in the 1840s.

and working toward a financially stable future, and his industry also allows Mrs. Lovett to thrive. [6]

The novel not only perverts the idea(l)s of capitalism, the economic system by which the middle classes flourished, but additionally explores the fluidity of social mobility, itself a source of discomfort. *The String of Pearls* foregrounds members of the service-worker class amassing the same kind of wealth that enabled a rapidly growing, perpetually upwardly mobile middle class to acquire power throughout the nineteenth century. This reminder of their own possible origins and of class permeability more generally would be unsettling enough, as more highly regarded novels of the same period suggest, and Todd's ability not only to amass middle-class wealth but to successfully impersonate the upper classes for his own benefit destabilizes the signifiers that compose class boundaries.

Todd, the narrator explains, is ill-favored and not very popular within his neighborhood, '[b]ut for all that he did a most thriving business, and was considered by his neighbors to be a very well-to-do sort of man': 'It was so handy for the young students in the Temple to pop over to Sweeney Todd's to get their chins new rasped . . . that from morning to night he drove a good business' (2007, p. 5). That Mrs. Lovett's pie shop is similarly successful is apparent, even to observers unaware of just how low her operating costs are. Its introduction occurs in Chapter 4, a change in location from Todd's neighboring barbershop, which has dominated the opening chapters: a scene of chaos is described as taking place at noon each day, with the narrator asking what might be 'sufficiently alarming and extraordinary to excite the junior members of the legal profession to such a species of madness' before identifying the cause as 'purely one of a physical character,' that is, 'to see who will get first to Lovett's pie-shop' (p. 28-29). The pies, beginning at noon, 'were brought up on large trays, each of which contained about a hundred, and from these trays they were so speedily transferred to the mouths of Mrs [sic passim] Lovett's customers that it looked like a work of magic' (p. 30)—the entire process of production and consumption reduced to something like an assembly line for maximized profit, even down to the St. Dunstan's bell serving as a factory shift whistle.

Mrs. Lovett is the consummate customer service professional, 'buxom, young and good-looking,' and able to produce an atmosphere wherein 'every enamoured young scion of the law . . . pleased himself with the idea that the charming Mrs Lovett had made that pie especially for him' (p. 30). The narrator acknowledges her charm as customer service rather than any authentic fondness: visiting Mrs. Lovett's 'was pleasant, but at the same time it was provoking to all except Mrs Lovett, in whose favour it got up a sort of excitement that paid extraordinarily well' (p. 30). Her smiles and flirtations come free with a purchase. Unlike Todd, to whom the narrator never attributes a moment of regret, Mrs. Lovett seems hindered at times by feelings of guilt, but these moments can just as easily be read as self-interest, as her cupidity (bolstered by significant quantities of brandy) quickly overcomes any fear-*cum*-guilt; even cat meat would cost more than the free meat that Todd provides, and her customers love it. The origins of the product are eliminated from her consciousness as quickly as from the finished product that she sells, and she regularly has her bakers killed to further remove the means of production from the marketplace.[7]

[6] Despite their physical proximity and an overlapping customer base, Todd's barbershop and Mrs. Lovett's pie shop remain discrete entities both in location and plot for the first several chapters of *The String of Pearls*; Todd has long since polished off his first victim within the narrative by the time that Mrs. Lovett's pies are brought to the table. St. Dunstan's Church lies between them, with its catacombs serving as the conduit between the two. Notably, the chapter in which the stench from beneath the church, which eventually drives off the archbishop, lies at the numerical center of the novel, and marks the beginning of the end of the joint enterprise that has been going on for years.

[7] Mrs. Lovett's at first unknowing and then unwilling accomplices, her bakers, live underground, locked in a hellish mechanized bakery in her shop's basement and producing the sustenance for those who live above while subsisting on

While the obvious horror of the novel is in its eventual revelation that all of London has been paying for the privilege of devouring human flesh in Mrs. Lovett's luscious meat pies, Todd's mercenary motives and the threat embodied in his ability to transcend his own social class through the spoils of his crimes play an equally significant role. While many of his regulars hail from the courts, he also sees a significant number of out-of-town visitors and sailors, and it is these transient customers, specifically those with some sort of portable wealth, that he tends to kill and rob while performing the intimate service of a straight-razor shave. He is greedy, but typically not foolish, with the exception being his hoarding of material goods, the spoils of his crimes. This dangerous action suggests that he desires not just the wealth of the higher classes but also the visible markers of their class. Had he disposed of the top hats, canes, watches, and other objects taken from his victims, some marked with names, seals, or monograms, like he did the bodies of his victims, he would have perhaps been safer, but even when his terrified apprentice Tobias begins to remark on the numerous gentlemen who seem to have left their hats behind, Todd continues to stockpile these material spoils of his crimes. Todd's precise motives for keeping these commodities are out of character in a man for whom '[t]here can be no doubt but that the love of money was the predominant feeling' (p. 141).

Impersonating the Rich

Taking into account that Todd's first attempt to sell the titular string of pearls is to a pawn shop/lapidary, and that, as many readers would have been aware, opportunities for disposing of ill-gotten goods were not scarce in London in the 1840s (and even less so in the 1780s, before the creation of the London police force), it seems clear that it is not the difficulty in disposing of them that drives Todd to keep these items. The narrative describes his hoard in rich detail: 'such a volley of hats of all sorts and descriptions, some looped with silver, some three-cornered, and some square, that they formed quite a museum of that article of attire' (p. 145) in a locked cupboard in the parlor. Another cupboard conceals the entrance to the shut-off upper floors of Todd's home, and the first floor rooms 'contained a great quantity of miscellaneous property of all kinds and descriptions' (p. 145), a miscellany that the novel spends two pages cataloging in great detail, emphasizing both the monetary value and the uniqueness of the items.

Despite the locks and booby traps, this hoarding seems unreasonable in a man who does away with bodies and otherwise covers his tracks as thoroughly as Todd, and his plan to 'carry on the business in Fleet-street' for another few months once he sells the pearls 'so that any suspicious alteration in [his] fortunes may not give rise to suspicion' (p. 140), coupled with the material evidence of years of success, shows that he is not a careless man. But the hoarding of the identifiable spoils of his crimes and his stated intention to 'commence a new career, in which the barber will be forgotten, and the man of fashion only seen and remembered . . . fully capable of vying with the highest and the noblest, let them be who they may' (p. 141-142) suggest a dangerous fetishizing of social class as much as material wealth.

Todd is able to successfully dispose of the titular string of pearls, the acquisition of which opens the novel, by impersonating a nobleman negotiating a loan on behalf of the royal family. He is able to do so easily, first through the judicious expenditure of some of his amassed wealth on a suit of clothing and a hired carriage, easily-purchased markers of his feigned social status. The boy who delivers Todd's suit of clothes, ''which were to come to no less than 30 pounds . . . [and made] up in such a

the only food available to them, human flesh, anticipate H.G. Wells' Morlocks, the laboring underclass that sustains the indolent Eloi in *The Time Machine.*

style that they were to do for any nobleman . . . only fit to go to court in'' (p. 131), adds that, had it been known that they were clothes for a barber, ''I am quite certain that the clothes would not have been finished in the style they are, but quite the reverse'' (p. 131), but since they were paid for in advance, ''[t]he coat is of the finest velvet, lined with silk, and trimmed with lace . . . and all the rest of the dress is of the same style'' (p. 131). Another delivery boy follows, with '[s]ilk stockings, gloves, lace, cravats, ruffles, and so on' (p. 132), and nearly comes to blows with the boy coming to confirm the carriage and 'really handsome horses that Sweeney Todd had succeeded in hiring for the occasion' (p. 136).

Todd leaves his shop 'attired in the very height of fashion for the period' (p. 134) and accessorized with a sword that, to Tobias, looks hauntingly familiar: 'he had a recollection that a gentleman had come in to have his hair dressed, and had taken . . . off, and laid just such a sword across his hat during the operation' (p. 134). That is, the final touches to Todd's costume are drawn from his treasure hoard, material objects stolen from his victims; by taking a gentleman's sword in hand, he is able to slide into the gentleman's shoes, at least for a brief period. That he can so easily take his place not merely among the wealthy but among the powerful embodies a middle- and upper-class anxiety about social mobility and the attendant dilution of their own power and position. Todd achieves his social aspirations not through his purported occupation, which would elevate him at best to the lower edge of the class barely above his own, but through imitating those whom he serves.

Todd takes the pearls to 'John Mundel, an exceedingly wealthy person, a Dutchman by extraction, who was reported to make immense sums of money by lending to the nobility and others what they required on emergencies, at an enormous rate of interest' in exchange for 'the jewels, some costly plate, or the title deeds of an estate, perchance, as security' (p. 135). The narrator clarifies that Mundel is 'nothing more than a pawn-broker' and critiques the entire profession, lower-class practitioners of which the readers of *The String of Pearls* might be unhappily familiar. Mundel, perhaps a more critical audience than many, falls for Todd's outward presentation, calling him 'his lordship,' 'admitting to himself that that the equipage was faultless' and deciding that, based on the carriage and 'the rich dress of his visitor,' he would be happy to ''lay under an obligation a rather illustrious lady, by helping her out of a little pecuniary difficulty,'' provided the security is sufficient (p. 136). Mundel deceives himself that he is doing business with a duke on behalf of the queen, and his greed and desire for power leads him to write a check for a greater sum than he normally would, and the fraudulent exchange is presented as a victory over the powerful even as Todd himself is vilified.

Poor and working-class readers, relishing Todd's turning of the tables on a figure like Mundel, might similarly appreciate Todd's choice of victims even as they find Todd's actions objectionable. The first victim within the context of the novel is contemptuous of Todd, his seemingly servile barber, and the majority of Todd's victims not only are wealthy but engage in ostentatious public displays of that wealth coupled with contempt for those who serve them. Furthermore, as Todd nears his goal of becoming 'a man of fashion' (p. 141), his abuse of his dependent, Tobias, is emphasized—it is not new behavior, but the narrative becomes more descriptive—and if Tobias is morally right to turn on Todd—and the narrative and audience agree that he is, just as the dog who snaps at Todd for threatening him is in the right—then an argument could be made that Todd is also in the right, within the world of the novel, to turn on his oppressors.

Cannibalism in the Big City

Even as it casts Todd and Mrs. Lovett as the primary antagonists, *The String of Pearls* absolutely indulges fantasies of violence against the upper classes, most significantly through its use of and

challenge to the trope of urban cannibalism.[8] Cannibalism, an act subject to some of the strongest taboos in most cultures and a near-universal measure of savagery, is not uncommon in folklore and fiction, although the actual practice is less common historically than these representations suggest. In his introduction to *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, Peter Hulme explores 'why the cannibal scene means so much to us' (1998, p. 5) and how this 'trope of exceptional power' is met with '[d]isgust, but also desire; loathing, but also fascination' (p. 4, p. 6); rather than as an actual phenomenon, Hulme identifies cannibalism as 'quite simply the mark of greatest imaginable cultural difference' (20). The act of devouring human flesh is the indicator of the moment when the world has become a different place altogether.

The literal act of cannibalism serves many functions in literature. In the realms of travel narratives and imperial romance, the threat of cannibalism occurs almost as frequently as forbidden love or the submission of [insert Indigenous population here] to the white man's magic and is a simple means of justifying whatever brutality follows. Within a conflict between two ostensibly civilized populations, the turn to cannibalism becomes an ethical choice, as in the contemporary examples of *The Walking Dead* or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: the 'good guys' don't ever give in to survival cannibalism, whereas the 'bad guys' not only do but begin to revel in it. Revenge cannibalism often serves up poetic justice, as when Titus Andronicus delightedly feeds his daughter's rapists to his nemesis, their mother. Finally, there is literary cannibalism of the type that Jonathan Swift so modestly proposes, a system of cannibalism that mimics capitalism by advocating the exchange of money for a desired product.

The less satiric progeny of this final thread thrived and evolved throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and into the present, and in fact, urban legends of human-meat pies were in regular circulation by the time that *The String of Pearls* was published.[9] In Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example, Tom Pinch 'going astray,' may have possessed an 'evil genius,' but not to the extent of joining the ranks of 'those preparers of cannibalistic pastry, who are represented in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail business in the Metropolis' (1884, p. 577), suggesting by virtue of the brevity of the reference that 'cannibalistic pastry' had achieved the status of full-blown urban legend by 1844. Indeed, a character in *The String of Pearls* uses ''I wish . . . as I may be made into veal pies at Lovett's in Bell-yard if I as much as says a word'' (p. 6) as an oath. Sally Powell, writing about the robust trade in human remains in nineteenth-century fact and fiction, focuses primarily on 'the commodification of the human body' and the market for intact corpses rather than byproducts, but connects this issue—one of bodily autonomy, integrity, and sanctity—to that of bodily corruption from within, via the consumption of human flesh (p. 48); a robust trade in cadavers, whether found or 'resurrected,' existed alongside food and water of at best questionable origins and quality.

In *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew, in discussing the collapse of the street trade in 'penny pies' as shops became the norm, considers both the meat, 'bought in 'pieces,' of the same part as the sausage-makers purchase' (1861, p. 196), and the only somewhat facetious speculation into its origins, quoting one pieman who tells of ''[p]eople . . . [who] often begin crying, 'Mee-yow', or 'Bow-wow-wow!' at me; but there's nothing of that kind **now**. Meat, you see, is so cheap'' (p. 196,

[8] In *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, Mack draws on many of the sources that I have used to contextualize notions of cannibalism in and around the 1840s; however, as these examples were employed independently and are, I think, necessarily illustrative, I acknowledge the overlap but let the examples stand. Mack's discussion is much broader than my own, surveying both the mythic/literary cannibal from antiquity to the Brothers Grimm and real-life examples pre- and post-dating *The String of Pearls* to argue that the act itself has much to do with the story's longevity. Like Powell, he also makes explicit connections between cannibalism and body snatching.

[9] See Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising Life of Sweeney Todd*, pp. 7-14, for an in-depth discussion of nineteenth-century meat pies and their consumers.

emphasis added). Mayhew began the work that became *London Labour and the London Poor* in the 1840s, and the street vendors with whom he spoke lamented the collapse in their trade because pie shops like Mrs. Lovett's 'have now got most of the custom, as they make the pies much larger for the money than those sold in the streets,' as Mayhew was told by a pieman 'with considerable bitterness' (p. 196). The meat in the pies was highly seasoned 'because persons can't exactly tell the flavour of the meat with it,' and the gravy often provided with pies 'consisted of a little salt and water browned . . . [and w]ith this gravy a person in the line assured [Mayhew] that he has known pies four days old to go off very freely, and be pronounced excellent' (p. 196). This is all to show that meat pies, no matter how well-enjoyed, were justifiably suspect: whether cat, dog, or horse; the cheapest bits of veal or pork (and whatever vermin might slip in); or meat well past its prime in an era predating refrigeration; the meat in pies could be anything.

Some of the squalor of urban industrial mid-century London impacted all residents, given that the dirty, stinking Thames ran through the whole city and a cloud of industrial pollution hovered over it, but the worst of the adulterated food and contaminated water would be that available in the poor and working-class neighborhoods. *The String of Pearls*, however, extends the reach of the taint of cannibalism throughout the city and beyond. The narrator says of Mrs. Lovett's 'pork' and 'veal' pies that '[t]heir fame had spread even to great distances, and many persons carried them to the suburbs of the city as quite a treat to friends and relations there residing. And well did they deserve their reputation, those delicious pies; . . . to eat one of Lovett's pies was such a provocative to eat another' (p. 29).

Mrs. Lovett's pies are ''the cheapest and the best'' option in the area (p. 245), an area that Robert Mack identifies as 'a space within which the members of different social classes mingled . . . one in which the class divisions that elsewhere often rigorously separated and divided one group from another broke down; . . . an area of unpredictable social contagion and collision' (2007, p. 86). Given the area's mixed demographic and Mrs. Lovett's pies being cheapest as well as best, it must be assumed that they are consumed by working poor residents, but the narrative focuses on the consumption of those from the area's legal institutions, 'mostly from Lincoln's-inn . . . young and old, but most certainly a majority of the former . . . although from the neighbouring legal establishments likewise there come not a few; the Temple contributes its numbers, and from the more distant Gray's-inn there come a goodly lot' (p. 29), and into their mouths 'with what rapidity the pies disappeared!' (p. 30). It is these consumers whom the narrative critiques; while it is true that the unknowing consumers are victims of deception, the simple fact is that cannibalism was committed, and with great enthusiasm. Mrs. Lovett's middle-class customers garner little sympathy; they're faceless, for the most part, and Todd's assistant Tobias gestures toward the popular conception of the legal system when he says to an acquaintance, ''I have gone into another line: instead of being a lawyer, and helping to shave the clients, I am going to shave the lawyers now'' (p. 31).[10] The first connection in the novel between Todd's barbershop and the pie shop is one that emphasizes both the disparate customer base and the irresistibility of Mrs. Lovett's pies. Tobias risks his master's wrath because, the narrator explains, 'two penny-pieces were lying at the bottom of his pocket, [and] it was not in human nature to resist running into Lovett's and converting them into a pork pie' (p. 31): 'High and low, rich and poor, resorted to Mrs Lovett's pie-shop,' and Tobias sums up the feelings of all of greater London when he asks ''[W]ho would be an emperor, if he couldn't get pies like these?'' (p. 31).

[10] It is worth noting that the novel does not identify as Mrs. Lovett's customers workers in the industries for which Fleet Street is best known, journalism and publishing. This could, of course, be due to authorial wisdom or the influence of Edward Lloyd.

Throughout the novel, the tremendous enjoyment with which the pies are consumed is emphasized, complicating the consumers' status as victims of deception and also suggesting gluttony outside of their workday lunches. Perhaps in parody of the legal principle that ignorance of the law is no excuse, the narrative explicitly condemns a significant segment of London's population and singles out the lawyers among them, returning to Mrs. Lovett's at regular intervals to describe the insatiable lawyers and other middle-class consumers, particularly after it becomes clear to the reader what they are eating. Mrs. Lovett's pies attain the status of a poison, not as in a toxin but as a dangerous comestible, a source of corruption, and the middle class consumers are not permitted to recover from the infection. One man, shopping for his wife who is 'in a certain condition . . . and won't fancy anything but one of Lovett's veal pies' (p. 279), references the popular belief that a pregnant woman's desires will be impressed upon the child, leading the audience to imagine a London of the novel's future (the Dickensian present in which it was published) populated by citizens with a taste for human flesh. The final chapter looks into the future to describe the last surviving member of the Inns of Court 'who visited Lovett's pie-shop, and there luxuriated upon those delicacies . . . even now, as he thinks of how he enjoyed the flavour of the 'veal,' he shudders, and has to take a drop of brandy' (p. 281).

Absolving the Workers

While the narrative does not encourage the audience to absolve the middle-class consumers—who could just as easily be the consumed as the consumers, and the consumed, as representatives of a social class, are not innocent in *The String of Pearls*—it presses the audience to sympathize and even identify with two representatives of the working class who have also committed unknowing cannibalism: the exploited child laborer Tobias (whose mother has essentially sold him to Todd, who abuses him verbally and physically and eventually has him locked up in an asylum) and the nearly starving man who takes the job of baker that Mrs. Lovett offers. The latter is the last in a long line of at-first unknowing and then unwilling accomplices, and both the baker and Tobias are described consuming and enjoying the pies with as much enthusiasm as the men from the courts. Because penny plots cannot advance without wild coincidence, the baker turns out to be Mark Ingestrie (whose name suggests both ingesting and industry, the hallmarks of capitalism), the original 'owner' of the titular string of pearls[11] and the missing-presumed-dead beloved of the closest thing the novel has to a heroine, Johanna. At the end of the novel, it is he who springs out of a tray of pies to announce that ''Mrs Lovett's pies are made of *human flesh*'' (p. 280, italics in original) in the presence of a constable brought by Tobias, and their participation in the unmasking of Todd and Mrs. Lovett, the structure of the narrative suggests, outweighs their participation in both cannibalism and the crimes that surround it. Furthermore, as ever, the love of a good woman—Johanna remains faithful and devoted even as she joins forces with the characters investigating Todd, even dressing in drag to take the place of Tobias—contributes to the narrative absolution of his sins.

Episodes of their suffering provide a not-insignificant portion of the well-padded narrative; for the baker, 'At first everything was delightful, and . . . he found that it was no difficult matter to keep up the supply of pies by really a very small amount of manual labour. And that labour was such a labour of love, for the pies were delicious' (p. 172). However, when the novelty wears off, he is astounded—as a member of the middle class brought low by circumstances—to discover that he is ''condemned to such a slavery . . . even in the very heart of London . . . without the means of resisting the most frightful threats that are uttered against me'' (p. 176), a revelation that would perhaps be less astonishing to readers of the novel. His initial discontent is simply that ''one cannot be continually eating pie'' (p.

[11] That is, he is the man who stole them first, from, in fact, the indigenous population of a Pacific island who, of course, practice cannibalism.

173), but he quickly progresses from bored consumer to alienated worker, resisting being ‘‘made into a mere machine for the manufacture of pies’’ (p. 173) before being told that he is a prisoner and that he will be killed if he quits working (p. 176). Todd then speaks to him through a trapdoor, and his words could be those of a wealthy industrialist: ‘‘Make pies,’ said the voice, ‘eat them and be happy. How many a man would envy your position - withdrawn from all the struggles of existence, amply provided with board and lodging, and engaged in a pleasant and delightful occupation. It is astonishing how you can be dissatisfied!’’ (pp. 177-178). The baker resumes his work, but Mrs. Lovett eventually complains to Todd that this baker is ‘‘the most troublesome one I have had, because the most educated’’ (p. 259), a charge that echoes those who complained that educating the working class would have a negative impact on the status quo.

Tobias’s earlier suspicions about the luxury items seemingly left behind by customers lead him to investigate while Todd is meeting with Mundel. Upon finding the hoard previously described, he ‘could not help exclaiming aloud, — ‘How could Sweeney Todd come by these articles, except by the murder of their owners?’’ (146), but he is carried off to a madhouse by Todd before he can share the information with anyone (which is not his first inclination, being himself fearful of the law). Only after he escapes over the course of several chapters does he go to the constabulary, providing evidence that leads to Todd’s downfall. The two plots intersect when Tobias’s constable is on hand after Ingestrie’s revelation, having just arrested Sweeney Todd. Mrs. Lovett is immediately placed under arrest, although the charges are never stated, but then collapses, announcing that she, ironically, has been poisoned: Todd had earlier poured actual poison into her brandy bottle as she started questioning and threatening their long-standing agreement, knowing that she would at some near point turn to her brandy for comfort.

While ‘the throng of persons recoiled - what a roar of agony and dismay there was! How frightfully sick about forty lawyers’ clerks became all at once, and how they spat out the gelatinous clinging portions of the rich pies they had been devouring’ (p. 280), Ingestrie is reunited with Johanna and restored to his place in the social order, and the plot wraps up abruptly. Unlike the brandy-drinking legal man, who is the last of ‘the youths who visited Lovett’s pie-shop’ and is now ‘very, very old’ (p. 281) but still implicated in the mass cannibalism, Mark and Tobias are explicitly exonerated by the narrative, which closes with the end of their story. The former marries his beloved (who, the narrative makes explicit, never consumed a pie from Mrs. Lovett’s), and they ‘lived long and happily together, enjoying all the comforts of an independent existence’ with Tobias as their servant (p. 282). ‘[T]hey never forgot the strange and eventful circumstances connected with the String of Pearls’ (282), but Tobias and Mark, along with the narrative itself, seem to forget that they were active, albeit unknowing, participants and consumers in Todd and Mrs. Lovett’s schemes, absolution not granted to the anonymous middle-to-upper-class consumers. Additionally, the poor and working-class residents of the neighborhood, with whom the original audience of *The String of Pearls* would identify, must be cannibals as well, but the text does not implicate them as a group as it does the men of the law courts.

Conclusion

The cannibal may devour from the margins or from within, embodies unparalleled violence, and is almost always infused with meaning as a symbol beyond their place in a plot. It may be a critical commonplace to read cannibalism as a metaphor for any struggle between a dominant group and those whom they oppress, but Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett conspire to feed the rich to all of London, turning the popular metaphor-made-flesh of cannibalism-as-exploitation on end. The tale of Sweeney Todd has been rewritten more than once and, most famously, set to music by Stephen Sondheim to become a revenge tragedy with only the collateral damage of cannibalism on a massive scale marring

the satisfaction that audiences can take in Todd's actions against the man who had him framed and transported, raped his wife into insanity, and now has designs on his teenaged daughter. It is this version of Sweeney Todd and these motives with which most audiences are familiar, but the original version of the tale offers no such motivation, emphasizing a desire to accumulate tangible rewards rather than to fulfill a physical or emotional need. In *The String of Pearls*, Todd and Mrs. Lovett are rebellious representatives of the metaphorically devoured who facilitate a revolutionary turn on their oppressors, who become the literally devoured.

The criminal enterprises of Todd and Mrs. Lovett are not just the products of capitalism and generic desire; they are facilitated by the changes that industrialization and capitalism brought about: urban alienation is a product of communities growing and populations moving as well as of the terrific poverty in which many lived. With the rise of capitalism, its leaders reasonably began to fear the rise of those whom they oppressed, and *The String of Pearls* capitalizes on anxieties about working class insurrection and urban crime, fears rooted in the imagined, the historical, and their present.

Crime ultimately does not pay in *The String of Pearls*, challenging arguments about the slippery slope between reading material and a life of street crime; however, the novel is staged in a commodity-driven world of fluid boundaries and suggestively enacts violent conflict between social classes. The cannibalism, itself an almost too-obvious metaphor for the capitalist system that created the conflict, also reflects a fear of poison, of contaminated goods, that is paralleled in the panics over what Greenwood called, decades later, 'penny packets of poison,' texts that he claimed were just as dangerous as Sweeney Todd's penny shaves and as toxic as Mrs. Lovett's penny pies. Although the apprehension over their consumption by servants public and private was presented by concerned parties like Greenwood as altruism, it is likely that the unease was as much about protecting the bodies of the bourgeoisie as the minds and souls of the poor and working classes.

Furthermore, although Mrs. Lovett's customers come from all levels of London society, it is the middle classes' cannibalism that the narrative highlights, implicating them in a most savage act of devouring their own rather than their usual diet of the oppressed. In this reversal, the capitalist—living and flourishing off of the blood and bodies of the workers as part of a system of industrialized exploitation in worship of Mammon—is devoured. *The String of Pearls* uses cannibalism to challenge social hierarchies constructed on an equation of social standing with morality, instead indulging 'a frisson of escapist 'what if,' in which audiences simultaneously identified with the horror of the act' and enjoyed a parodic inversion of social interaction in a capitalist system (Guest, p. 113), a fantasy of having one's oppressors for dinner with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

Author Bio

Leah Richards is an Associate Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York, and the Co-Executive Editor of *Supernatural Studies*. Her research focuses on monsters, sometimes literal and always symbolic, and she has published on Stoker's *Dracula* and Romero's *Dead.* She would probably commit survival cannibalism, but only if there were seasoning available.

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