

The Legend of Sweeney Todd

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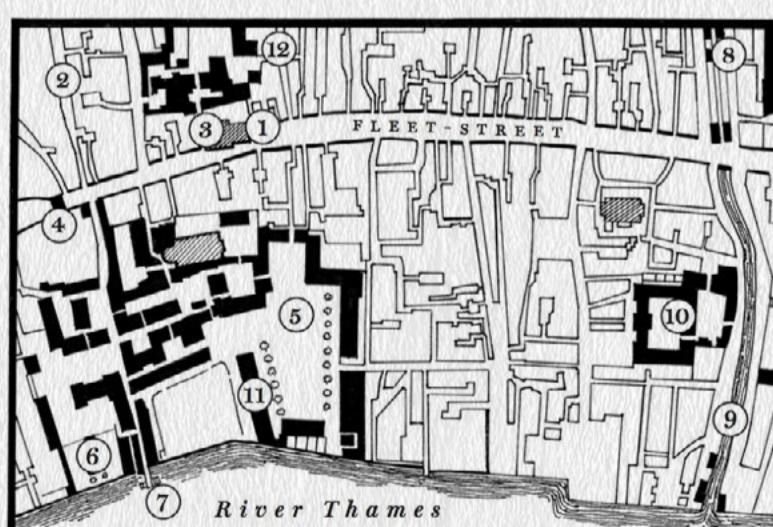
Famous nowadays for its on-screen and on-stage presence, the diabolical barber of Fleet Street was born a newspaper character. Created in 1846 inside Edward Lloyd's People's Periodical and Family Library, Sweeney Todd appeared as one of the main protagonists of a penny blood anonymously published under the title *The String of Pearls*.

Like many other stories of the same genre, the tale was woven around sensationalism: theft, disappearances and murder, which pervade the original story in order to easily catch the interest of its audience. The plot of the *String of Pearls* starts with the arrival of Lieutenant Thornhill in London, coming back from a long journey in the far East: he carries a beautiful necklace he is meant to give to the angel-like Johanna as a present from her lover Mark Ingestrie who vanished at sea while he was on the same crew as Thornhill. Sweeney Todd, a quiet and somewhat eccentric barber practicing his profession right next to the church of St Dunstan-in-the-West (located at 186a Fleet Street), steals the string of pearls as the lieutenant came in for a shave and mysteriously does away with his victim. The story, published in weekly episodes, therefore takes the shape of a long-term investigation led by Johanna, Tobias and other detective-like characters, aiming at solving the problem of Thornhill's vanishing and more specifically that of Sweeney Todd's ways of "polishing off" his victims. In this theatrical stride along Fleet Street and the Temple, the reader is stricken by horror at the revelation of Todd's scheme, famously alluding to the use of the victims' corpses as the main ingredient for Mrs Lovett's famously delicious Meat Pies. Indeed, the discovery of the bodies in the vaults under the church of St Dunstan, investigated after a horrible smell started to fill the holy building, enables Todd to be stopped and hanged publicly, while Mrs Lovett dies of poison a few pages earlier: the tale finishes by a form of moral



St Dunstan-In-the-West

SWEENEY TODD'S LONDON
KEY
1. Sweeney Todd's barber shop (186 Fleet-street)
2. Mrs Lovett's Pie-shop (Bell-yard)
3. St Dunstan's church (St Dunstan in the West)
4. Temple-bar
5. The Temple
6. Temple-gardens
7. Temple-stairs
8. Fleet Market
9. Fleet Ditch
10. Bridewell Prison
11. Paper-buildings
12. Fetter-lane



A map by Robert Mack published in "Sweeney Todd: the demon barber of Fleet Street", 2010

lesson, rewarding the heroes and punishing the sadistic greediness of the two criminals.

While fictitious, Sweeney Todd's barbershop is set in Fleet Street but the text fails to mention the exact location. Yet, based on the proximity of his shop and of the church of St Dunstan that are both connected by a secret imaginary passageway in the story, it has been identified by Robert Mack as being located at the n°186. Discussion however continues, and another famous hypothesis sets Todd's shop at the current position of the Old Bank pub (194 Fleet Street).



One of the alleged homes of Sweeney Todd. Fleet Street, London.

Added to its melodramatic nature, the simple, yet pleasant, style of writing failed to convince the critics to include the *String of Pearls* within the Literary Canon, and therefore destined its popularity to remain oral, be it through the narration of Sweeney Todd's murders by local inhabitants or through the constant and approximate reenactment of the plot by numerous dramatic adaptations. Yet, this orality is not simply the result of a derogatory consideration: the writing of Sweeney Todd's story inherits a tradition of urban tales shared within the lower classes. Considering the living conditions of the London poor in the early 19th century that might be summarised by the mention of a proximity with cemeteries, a general lack of infrastructures, a demographic boom and the harshness of industrial work, a wide part of the popular culture of the time lay in the expression of an anxiety related to the turmoil of the new city life. The latter entailed a feeling of alienation, solitude and death that contrasted with the communal and comforting vision of the countryside and explains the portrayal of a grisly killing force acting in the shade of London alleys through the character of Sweeney Todd. After all, penny blood writers were aiming at reaching their audience by using their social imaginary, which is exactly what happens in *The String of Pearls*.



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Additional notes

Prepared by: Joséphine Betzer, 2023

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Source: Original research