



# SWEENEY TODD: ADAPTATION ACROSS MEDIA & TIME



## JACK WILLIAMS



### Abstract

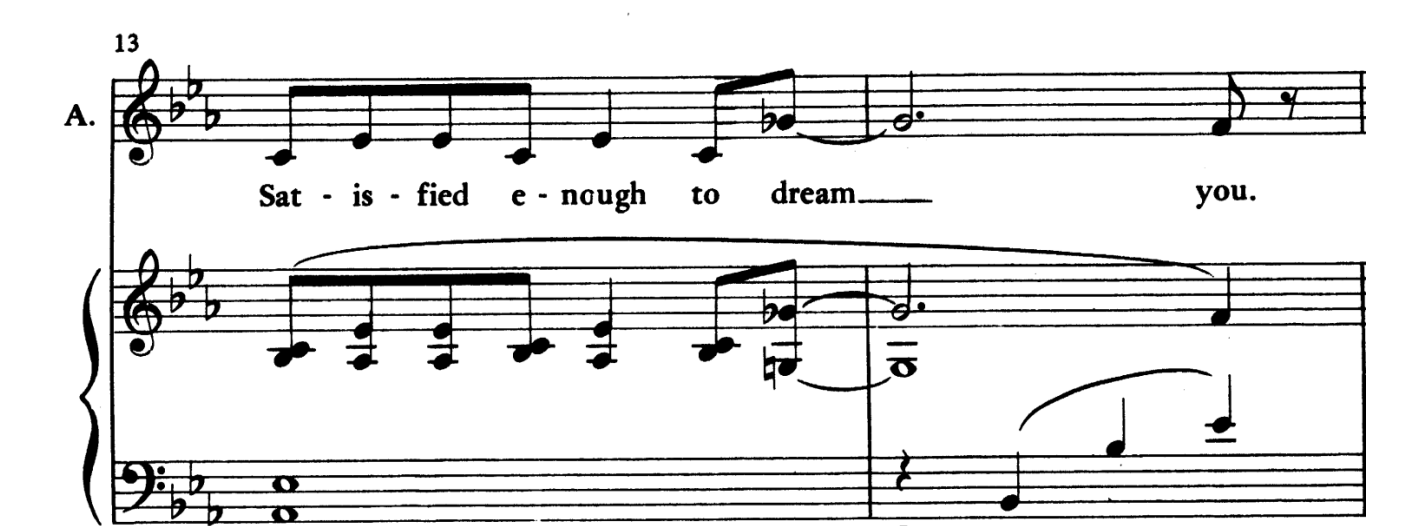
The character of Sweeney Todd has remained relevant for over a century and has been portrayed within a diverse array of storytelling platforms such as novels, plays, and musicals. The question is why has the narrative compelled so many generations throughout the years? In what ways have adaptational practices been utilized to translate the text from one medium to another, and how have the societal themes contained in the story continued to fascinate audiences? The media analyses include literature, theatre and film while the themes discussed are predominantly class and mental illness. Media studies and critical/cultural studies have been applied to this research topic to unpack the basis of this story's significance across time and media. The results assert that the dark characterization within the story is paramount to its narrative intrigue, and that each platform of storytelling offers a unique level of accessibility to its audience.



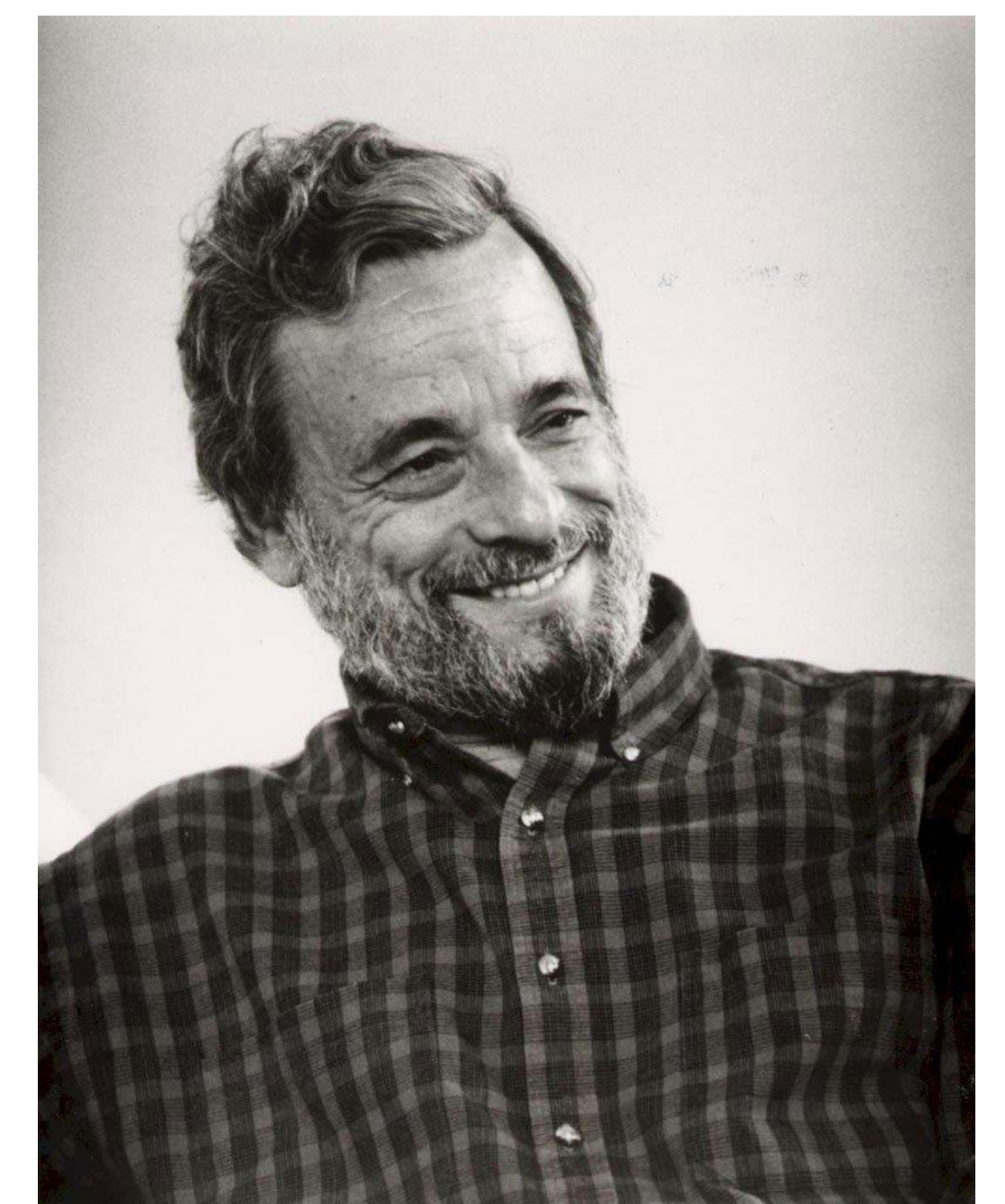
### Sonic Rhetoric: Sound Communicates Text

- Sound carries textual messages all on its own, with or without music. Sondheim was a genius at communicating the story this way.
- I highlight the song "Johanna" to exemplify these qualities. I actually sang the piece myself in the fall for my voice studio.

- In this example a G $\flat$  in the melody is juxtaposed against a prevailing G natural in the accompaniment which is very unusual.
- This fascinating non-chord tone is embraced for its discordance.



- Lead-in to the 2nd refrain has a harmonic shift which throws us off of the tonic.
- After this moment, returning to E $\flat$  allows a greater catharsis.

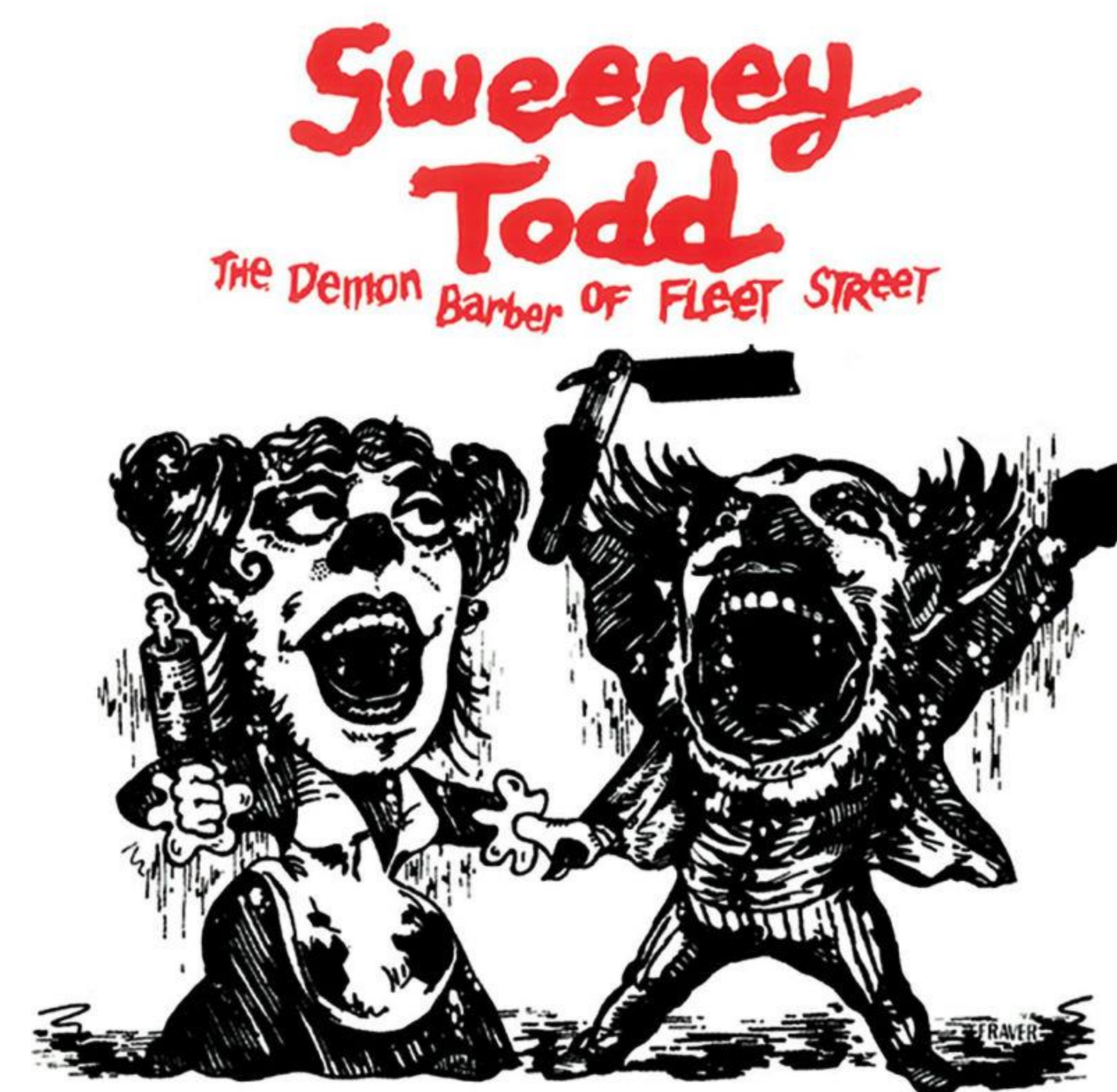


- Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021) reshaped musical theatre into a much more personal, realistic, and thematically complex form of storytelling.
- He passed away from cardiovascular disease on November 26th, 2021.
- Sondheim carried the torch of the *Sweeney Todd* narrative through both the generations and the platforms of storytelling alike with his work.



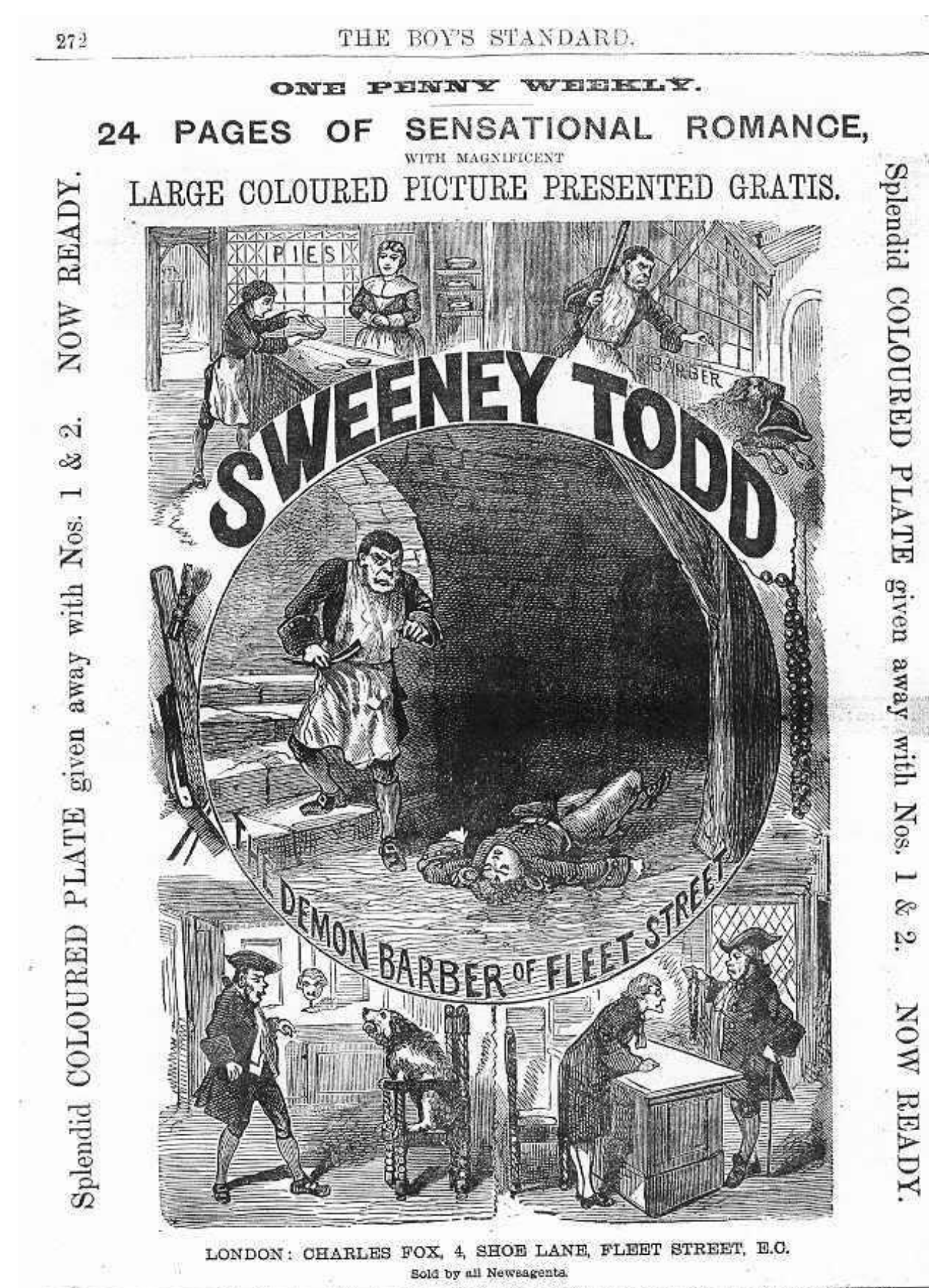
### A Brief History of *Sweeney Todd*

- Sweeney Todd character makes his literary debut in the periodically released *The String of Pearls* serials (1846-1847)
- These serials, much like the other cheaply-produced and popular British literature of the 1800s, were referred to as "penny-dreadfuls" due to their only costing a penny and being considered low-brow.
- Various media are explored over the next hundred years, leading to Christopher Bond's 1973 stage play. This rendition adds a tragic backstory for Sweeney
- Stephen Sondheim adapts the play into his own musical in 1979. It wins the Tony Award for Best Musical of the Year.
- Musical given a cinematic adaptation in 2007 for the widest audience yet with Johnny Depp starring and Tim Burton directing.



### Mainstream Demons: A Cultural Critique

- "Mainstream" implies that the dominant discourse within society has composed a universal understanding of the "demons" a.k.a. the other.
- "Demon" encompasses a malevolent force influenced by society's demands and which creates social barriers between people and communities.
- Taken together, "mainstream demons" can be defined as any social group or community with traits or characteristics portrayed in media (usually Western) as aberrant or otherwise adverse.
- Mainstream demons analyzed and critiqued in *Sweeney Todd* include working class, mental illness, and even sexual deviancy.
- Embodying these identities on-stage and using the satirical narrative to "exorcise" the demons is an important process for societal and cultural growth.



- Despite the uncouth platform of a penny-dreadful serial, *The String of Pearls* contained a perceptive critique of the state of British working class
- Each chapter was effective at hooking readers with romance and thrills
- Each chapter also came with an illustration. This sketch-style of the 19th century was paid homage by Sondheim's 1979 marketing logo – see the center of this poster.