

Sameya Begum

Professor Slentz, Professor Grinenko

FIQWS HA19

08 December 2020

Sweeney Todd & Injustice of Capitalistic Society

Musicals are devised with the motive of capturing the audience's mind towards a world of comedy and entertainment but they also pertain to an enigmatic reality that can be only identified once the curtain of ambiguity is unveiled. The creation of musicals might seem to have a mere purpose of enjoyment, however it is often used as a successful tool to delineate copious social injustices done in a society. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979)* is one such musical where viewers are showcased with a plot filled with thriller, drama and comedy but is also used as a source to represent the atrocious realities of a capitalistic society. The musical follows with Benjamin Barker, a man who returns to London as Sweeney Todd for vengeance due to being unjustly convicted by a corrupt and vicious judge—Judge Turpin, ultimately becoming an unmitigated representation of a capitalistic predator. With this effort of showcasing a vengeance plot, the musical *Sweeney Todd* successfully insinuates the cynical reality of capitalism and projects prevalent injustices done within a capitalistic society.

The nefarious reality of capitalistic influences are represented as the musical *Sweeney Todd* demonstrates an interrelatedness between the character Sweeney Todd and Marxism. For example, the musical represents Sweeney Todd's identification as a "barber" which indicates

Sweeney's association with the economic market and hints towards his function in the capitalistic system. Sweeney's occupation as a barber is further connected with capitalism as he is portrayed to have a mechanical nature. For example, in *'Attend the Tale of Sweeney Todd': Adaptation, Revival, and Keeping the Meat Grinder Turning*, Louise Creechan juxtaposes Sweeney Todd's machine-like characteristics with a book called *Capital 1867*, where Karl Marx compares the industrial workers with that of a machine. This is depicted in the scene where Todd gets his razor back and says "at last, my right arm is complete again." Through the addition of this phrase, the musical lucidly makes a comparison between Sweeney Todd and machinery, which are key aspects to the views of Marxism. As Marx says "the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him" (106). In essence, one can clearly perceive the musical as a representation of capitalism, just as how Creechan says it is a "Marxist critique of a wider capitalistic society" (99). The aspect of characterizing a human as a machine hints towards how people, in a capitalistic society, are treated as mere objects or machines who are used as products of capitalism.

The musical is further unveiled as Anette Pankratz compares cannibalism with capitalism in *The Pleasures in the Horrors of Eating Human Flesh* on the basis of the plot of *Sweeney Todd*. Pankratz successfully relates capitalistic features with cannibalism by demonstrating the abhorrent business of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett as they sell pies made out of human meat. In her article, Pankratz states, "their criminal methods—men who disappear after a visit at the barber's and who no-one seems to miss; pies for quick consumption with not too many questions asked about the origin of the meat—are only possible in the anonymity of a metropolis like London with unfettered enterprise, greed, and mass consumption" (398). This implicates two

aspects of capitalism: the greed caused by capitalism that blinds a person to an extent where they adopt nefarious means of earning and the blindness of consumers as they are only interested in the products rather than the truth behind it. This reveals that capitalistic society is viewed as a society where only profits in business are highlighted to an extent where humanity is overlooked by acts of cannibalism.

The cynical reality of capitalism is further emphasized as the musical contains a popular song called "A Little Priest". In this song, Mrs. Lovett solves the issue of mounting piles of dead bodies as she gets the idea of baking the dead bodies into her pies. As the song states: "Seems an awful waste... I mean, with the price of meat what it is, When you get it, If you get it... Take, for instance, Mrs. Mooney and her pie shop: Business never better using only pussycats and toast, And a pussy's good for maybe six or seven at the most, And I'm sure they can't compare as far as taste!" (Sondheim) This demonstrates how the thirst for profit becomes so powerful in capitalist society that the value of a human life is demeaned. In addition, in *Sweeney Todd and cannibalistic Capitalism*, it is mentioned how "...Mrs. Lovett doesn't get this idea through any sociopathic tendencies on her own part: she very pointedly derives her criminality from the need for a competitive edge on the market." (Pico) This insinuates the negative influences of a capitalistic society as Mrs. Lovett is seen as someone who becomes a "capitalistic predator" and a person who can cross all the boundaries of bestiality just to accomplish her iniquitous methods of profiting. It is lucid that the influences of capitalism are appalling that it blinds a person from seeing what's right or wrong and causes them to do the most inhuman acts.

The addition of cannibalistic features into the musical also insinuates the belief of Marx and Engels about how political power is "merely the organized power of one class for oppressing

another” (Sanderson-946). The idea of man feeding off of man hints towards the copious class struggles between the bourgeoisies and the lower class people due to the existence of capitalism. In *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* by Hugh Wheeler, Sweeney says “at the top of the hole sit the privileged few, making mock of the vermin in the lower zoo, turning beauty into filth and greed” (9) This demonstrates how the bourgeoisies are basically the capitalist rulers, who oppress the lower class people due to their greed and odious acts. When it comes to the market and business, the bourgeoisies show no mercy towards the lower class and treat them similar to that of animals, representing how people are dehumanized in a capitalistic society. The capitalistic mindset of the upper class also hints towards a Darwinian worldview as Sweeney Todd finds the idea of cannibalism as “eminently practical” and has the belief that “if this really is a dog-eat-dog world, why not feed the dogs to each other?” (Pico) It is seen in the musical how Todd and Mrs.Lovett, instead of feeling shameful towards their mindset, decide upon imagining the profits they would gain and feel proud while saying “How gratifying for once to know/That those above will serve those down below!” As this is said, it becomes transparent how capitalistic society pertains to a social class struggle where humans suffer unjustly, regardless of where they stand. The desideratum of turning the upper echelon of the social structure into meat for pies that feed the general inhabitants reiterates Marx and Engels’ point about the prevalence of oppression done on people, even when the upper class “has to feed him [the slave], instead of being fed by him” (483) as a means of business. It is perspicuous how the existence of a capitalistic society does harm to people and causes them to suffer inequitably when it comes to profit and business.

It is vivid that the existence of capitalism influences the people in such a way that their only interest becomes profit. In *The Rise of The Machines*, John P. Rafferty mentions the abysmal working conditions faced by industrial workers in a capitalistic society. He states that “when factories sprung up in the cities and industrial towns, their owners prized production and profit over all else. Worker safety and wages were less important.” This implicates the fact that during the time of industrial revolution, people had to endure terrible working conditions, only to satisfy the needs of capitalistic leaders. In addition to the harsh treatment, workers had to deal with very hazardous working conditions, which could have caused their life too. As stated by Upton Sinclair, in *The Jungle*, “you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it” and the working conditions were so perilous that worker would fall in bare where they are turned into “pure beef lard” (116). This relates back to how Mrs. Lovett uses people as meat and hints towards the injustice done on those workers as they are forced to work in a hazardous condition and had to be at the edge of losing their life. What matters in a capitalistic society is profit and prosperity of the upper class people and that is acquired by capitalistic leaders or capitalistic predators at the cost of its workers, the lower class people.

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979) is a musical that revolves around the theme of capitalism and contains a plot filled with thriller and drama that not only successfully entertains people but also opens the eyes of viewers about how a capitalistic society looks. Through the delineation of meat-packing and cannibalism, the musical apprises its audiences about the level of brutality a capitalistic society can hold. With the existence of

capitalism, people are used as machines, where their lives don't worth anything and only profit and market economy is prioritized. People get dehumanized in such a way that they end up being used as machinery or mere products of capitalism. From cannibalistic features to the struggles between different social classes caused by capitalism, the musical successfully projects and discloses the prevalent injustices and cynicism done inside a capitalist society.

Work Cited

- Creechan, Louise. "‘Attend the Tale of Sweeney Todd’: Adaptation, Revival, and Keeping the Meat Grinder Turning ." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2016,
www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/9-1%202016/NVS%209-1-5%20L-Creechan.pdf.
- Pankratz, Anette. "The Pleasures in the Horrors of Eating Human Flesh: Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s Sweeney Todd." *The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating* (2010): 387.
- Sondheim, Stephen. "Stephen Sondheim (Ft. Angela Lansbury & Len Cariou) – A Little Priest." *Genius*, 17 Apr. 1979, genius.com/Stephen-sondheim-a-little-priest-lyrics.
- Pico. "Sweeney Todd and Cannibalistic Capitalism." *Daily Kos*, 15 Dec. 2007,
www.dailykos.com/stories/2007/12/15/422651/-.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The Marx-Engels Reader. 2nd edition. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton; 1978. 469-500. Print.
- Sanderson, John. "Marx and Engels on the State." *JSTOR*, Dec. 1963,
www.jstor.org/stable/445852?seq=1.
- Wheeler, Hugh. "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street." New York, Dodd, Mead & Company. 1979.
- Rafferty, John P. "The Rise of the Machines: Pros and Cons of the Industrial Revolution." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.,

www.britannica.com/story/the-rise-of-the-machines-pros-and-cons-of-the-industrial-revolution.

Sinclair, Upton. "The Jungle." Moses Law,

moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/The_Jungle_Upton_Sinclair.pdf.