We All Deserve To Die: 
Uncovering the Warped Christological Model in 
Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd 

by 

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“And I know things now, many valuable things that I hadn’t known before.”
-Little Red Riding Hood, Into the Woods

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**Introit**

"Dies irae, dies illa  
Solvet saeclum in favilla  
Teste David cum Sibilla"

Day of wrath, that day  
Will dissolve the earth into ashes  
As David and the Sibyl testify

-Requiem Mass

The Revelation to John in the New Testament describes the apocalypse in vivid detail: cities on fire, the horsemen of the apocalypse blotting out the sun and moon, and thick black rain of fire. According to the author’s account, these events are the way God will bring about the total destruction of the world, thus bringing an end to death and pain… for some.¹ For others, a grim fate awaits.

The great judge of humanity, and the one personally overseeing the violent destruction of earth, is Jesus, Son of God. Before human souls may enter the new kingdom of heaven, they are to be judged by him. This is not the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew, preaching the peaceful Sermon on the Mount. Instead, “his eyes [are] like flame of fire, his feet [are] like burnished bronze… and from his mouth [comes] a sharp two-edged sword” as he reads the names of the saved from the Book of Life.² “Anyone whose name [is] not found written in the Book of Life [is] thrown into the lake of fire.”³ There, “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”⁴ There is no reconciliation of good and evil, rather, evil is downright eliminated from God’s world and

¹ Revelation 1:14-16.  
² Revelation 20:4.  
³ Revelation 20:15.  
⁴ Revelation 20:10.
destroyed. All who do not align with Jesus’s strict judgment are condemned to endless separation from God, burning in fiery agony for all eternity. In the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, the horrific and terrifying scene detailed in John’s Revelation is recounted before the burial of the deceased. The apocalypse is referenced many times during the Mass, with the celebrant constantly pleading with God that the deceased’s soul be saved at the last judgment. Although many portions of the Requiem Mass deal with the last judgment, the violence and terror so vividly described in Revelation is perhaps detailed most in a poem known as the *Dies Irae*, Day of Wrath.5

According to Requiem Mass scholar Robert Chase, “This medieval text is unlike anything found in the texts of the [Eastern] Orthodox tradition and is unique to Roman Catholicism… [it is] picturesque and angry.”6 The poem’s pessimism is understandable given the prevalence, during the high Middle Ages, of plague, famine, and even gruesome theological frameworks that seem to reflect the harsh environment.7 Although traditionally attributed to the 13th Century Franciscan monk Thomas of Celano, recent archeological findings date the piece to at least the 12th Century. The poem’s text consists of nineteen verses, each composed of three lines with eight syllables; verses eighteen and nineteen are exceptions in both the original and translated text (Fig. 1).8 The

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5 The *Dies Irae* was removed from the Requiem Mass following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. All subsequent references to the *Dies Irae* apply to the Latin Rite used until Vatican II.
7 Chase, *Dies Irae*, 4.
8 See Appendix.
first seven verses describe the violence on the Day of Judgment. The earth will
dissolve into ashes, the dead will rise, and “whatever is hidden will reveal
itself./Nothing will remain unavenged.”9 This insistence on vengeance evokes
the text of John’s Revelation, again emphasizing apocalyptic violence. But
violence is not the sole focus of the poem. Rather, the Dies Irae can be broken
down into two major sections. The first part is worldwide in scope, describing
the horrors of the global eschaton. However, the text’s tone becomes more
personal as the speaker grows introspective with regard to his own moral
record. “Guilt reddens my face./Spare a suppliant, O God…/To me also hast
Thou given hope.”10 In the second part, although the speaker remains in
terrified awe of God, he trusts that God’s mercy will overpower God’s will to
vengeance. He asks Jesus to intercede even though he concedes that “my
prayers are not worthy,/But Thou in Thy mercy, grant/That I burn not in
everlasting fire.”11 Ultimately, God is a merciful and loving deity.

The melody of the Dies Irae is probably the best known chant of the
Middle Ages. Like the Dies Irae’s text, the melody’s author is also
anonymous. Robert Chase suggests that it was composed during the early
periods of the construction of Notre Dame de Paris (1163-1240s), but exact

9 Chase, Dies Irae, 5.
10 Chase, Dies Irae, 6.
11 Chase, Dies Irae, 6.
dating is nearly impossible due to the tune’s ubiquitous nature in sacred manuscripts by the 13th Century. Its melodic structure is as follows:

The melody is divided into six principal melodic lines, of which the first three are further sub-divided into three phrases. (Verses 1-2, 7-8, and 13-14, employ the first melodic line; Verses 3-4, 9-10, and 15-16, the second melody and Verses 5-6, 11-12, and 17, the third melody. The last three verses, 18-20, employ the remaining three melodies).

As Chase rightly points out however, it is the first melodic line that has become so well known. It is this melody that has been quoted and paraphrased by composers for centuries.

The quoted melody is rather simple: four pitches arranged into a series of eight notes (Fig. 2). While it began its life as part of the Catholic Requiem Mass, this mini-melody can be found in a non-liturgical setting as early as the 17th Century. Beginning in the 19th Century, it was utilized by composers to great effect in symphonies, concertos, and solo pieces. In Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, for example, the chant is used to create the image of a black Sabbath dance full of witches and demons. Liszt too uses the theme in his symphonic piece *Totentanz* (“Death-Dance”) to convey a feeling of mourning and gloom. Even composers like Camille Saint-Saëns and Sergei

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12 Chase, *Dies Irae*, 509.
14 Musical references are listed, in order of their discussion, in the Appendix. Chase, *Dies Irae*, 509-510.
15 First used secularly during the Early French Baroque Period. Chase, *Dies Irae*, 514.
Rachmaninoff cite the *Dies Irae* in their works.\textsuperscript{16} For all of these men, although the melody is divorced from its historically liturgical context, the tune still conveys the feelings of dread, gloom, and death.

In the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, film composers also began to cite the chant in their otherwise secular scores. As early as Gottfried Huppertz’s score for the silent film *Metropolis* in 1927, the *Dies Irae* came to convey for films the same bleak ideas that it did in 19\textsuperscript{th} Century Romantic Music.\textsuperscript{17} Not only that, but the melody can be heard in the scores to a wide variety of films covering an array of genres: *The Seventh Seal*, *The Shining*, and even the Disney musical *The Lion King*.\textsuperscript{18} It would seem that the melody is almost unlimited in its ability to evoke morbid feelings in every form of music and in every genre of film. Interestingly though, when asked about their use of the *Dies Irae* in their film scores, most composers shrug the question. John Williams for example, when discussing the tune’s brief (and semi-humorous) use in the film *Home Alone*, simply says “it’s iconic.”\textsuperscript{19} In fact, the reasoning behind its use in scores of any kind is repeatedly overlooked. Composers and directors of the aforementioned films rarely, if ever, discuss at length why they have used the melody. Even Stanley Kubrick, a film-maker renowned for his attention to

\textsuperscript{16} Chase, *Dies Irae*, 512.

\textsuperscript{17} *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927).


detail in his films, has never elaborated on the use of the Dies Irae in The Shining, a film that focuses greatly on themes of death and murder.

Although the Dies Irae is prevalent in symphonic and film music, it is not common in the realm of American musical theater. Aside from one brief (and humorous) citation in the show Rent (1996), the Dies Irae can be found in one musical: Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979). I find this fact striking and it begs the question, why? Why, in an art form that is apparently devoid of the Dies Irae, does Sondheim choose this particular musical to utilize the melody?

As a composer and lyricist, Stephen Sondheim is infamous in American musical theater. New York Times critic Stephen Holden asserts that, in contrast to other Broadway composers of the 20th Century, “[Sondheim’s] work defies the escapism of traditional Broadway shows and uncovers uncomfortable truths about the human condition.”20 His scores are known for their intricate rhythmic structures, harmonic complexity, and many levels of interpretation. His lyrics often leave performers out of breath and tongue-tied with unmatched word play (e.g., “Or we have some Shepherd’s Pie peppered/with actual shepherd/on top.”).21 Sondheim speaks frequently about his scores and their detailed construction. His recent book, Finishing the Hat, is a reflection on many of his scores and lyrics, expanding on why Sondheim wrote what he

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wrote. In one example, Sondheim explains how he constructed the entire score to the musical *Pacific Overtures* using only notes from the Japanese pentatonic scale.\(^{22}\) Suffice to say, Sondheim’s book is quite comprehensive, and his approach to his own material is meticulous.

In discussing the music for *Sweeney Todd* for a Broadway Masterworks podcast, Sondheim explains how, as a student of Milton Babbitt’s, he studied Bach fugues and examined the way the composer “built a cathedral out of four notes.” Sondheim was particularly fascinated by the way “those four notes determine the entire structure of the piece” and he chose to use this method to construct *Sweeney Todd*’s score.\(^{23}\) Although he never states it outright during the interview, Sondheim is doubtlessly referring to the four notes that make up the first phrase of the *Dies Irae* theme. But his idea to base his musical on these four notes is cryptic to be sure. Why these notes? What about the story of *Sweeney Todd* lends itself to this particular musical phrase? Judging from the level of detail put into the example from *Finishing the Hat*, it would be uncharacteristic of Sondheim to base an entire musical’s structure on a specific four-note theme simply because he thought it sounded nice. While composing *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim was, in fact, well aware that the *Dies Irae* was an integral part of the Catholic Requiem Mass. As Len Cariou (the actor to originate the musical’s protagonist) relates, when Sondheim informed him

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about his decision to base the entire show’s structure off of the Dies Irae, Cariou told the composer “You’re sick.” To which Sondheim grinningly replied, “Yeah, I am.”

What does the Dies Irae tell us about Sweeney Todd? Is the tune anything more than just “moody?” If we know the melody’s history in liturgical and secular art, can we interpret Sweeney Todd in a new light? This thesis began with these questions and is the result of my investigation for answers. In short, I believe the music is more than just a creepy group of notes. Knowledge of the Dies Irae’s history in conjunction with an understanding of dominant theological thought at the time of its composition enables the short musical motif to take on a new meaning in Sweeney Todd. Namely, the music points us to a fascinating, yet perverted, Christian lens through which we can read the story and libretto. This thesis will uncover and describe that lens in three ways.

The first chapter offers an overview of the medieval philosophical theology that subtends the Dies Irae, in particular, the theologians Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. I focus mainly on their theological models of sin and redemption as played out through Jesus’s death and resurrection, expanding on their frameworks and elaborating upon their conceptions of the Christian God. The second chapter reviews Sweeney Todd’s libretto, relating our theologians’ Christological models to the character arc of the musical’s protagonist. This

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24 Podcast, “Sweeney Todd”.
primarily textual analysis will outline the show’s warped Christological model, and will bring us back, in the third chapter, to the *Dies Irae*, demonstrating how the music is the viewer’s key to reinterpreting *Sweeney Todd*. In addition to studying the *Dies Irae*, the third chapter reviews selected major productions of the musical, studying the ways in which the dark theological framework has been expressed through various production designs.
Kyrie

“Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.”
–Requiem Mass

“It is impossible that, without Him, any member of the human race could be saved.”
–Anselm of Canterbury

In the years following the death of Jesus, various Roman writers postulated a multitude of conflicting ideas as to what Jesus actually accomplished by living, dying, and being resurrected. Gnostic Christians believed he was sent by the “true” god to alert humans to the fact that the world they lived in was a false creation by a false deity.25 The martyr Ignatius of Loyola believed Jesus’s execution was an example to be followed by true Christians in order to join God.26 Even the gospel writers view Jesus from different perspectives: Matthew likens Jesus to a Jewish rabbi, while Mark sees him as an apocalyptic preacher.2728 Yet, despite centuries of writings about the person of Jesus, nearly none lays out the theological purpose of Jesus’s death and resurrection. In the New Testament, only the apostle Paul’s writings speak about Jesus’s death as a means for gentiles and Jews to attain eternal salvation without following Jewish Law.29

27 “After he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them.” Matthew 5:1-2.
28 “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light... then they will see the Son of Man coming... gather[ing] his elect from the ends of the earth.” Mark 13:24-25.
29 “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to promise.” Galatians 3:29.
of God.”

Even after the consolidation of the Christian Bible in the early 4th Century by Eusebius and the establishment of the Nicene Creed in 325 as the Christian profession of faith, the question still seemed unanswered: why did Jesus die? Answering this question is not so easy, for it raises additional, more troubling questions. Why would God become man if he is all powerful and merciful? How can Jesus be both God and man? How can a God-man die? Why did that God-man die?

In 1098, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, wrote a treatise entitled Cur Deus Homo, or, Why God Became Man in which he outlined a detailed theology to answer these questions. By this time, Anselm had become a prolific theologian. In his texts, Anselm frequently utilized an “experimental method… to consider… aspects of the divine nature.” According to Anselm himself, Cur Deus Homo employs such an experimental method in order to “contemplate the logic of our beliefs.” He wanted “to bring the enquirer to the realization that when he had done his reasoning he would find that he arrived where faith would also take him.”

In Catholicism, faith entails a belief in Jesus as the savior of humanity. Here, Anselm promises to prove what faith believes, namely, how a God-man’s death provides eternal life for all.

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33 Davies & Leftow, The Cambridge Companion to Anselm, 11.
Anselm was well aware of the conflicting accounts of the theological purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the preface to *Cur Deus Homo*, he discusses the fact that many church fathers “speak frequently and on a grand scale about the logical principles of our faith.” Despite these frequent elaborations on the logical principles of faith, it seems that Anselm thought these needed to be clarified and ordered in accordance with his experimental method.

*Cur Deus Homo* was also written during a time of crisis in the church in England as well as in Rome. In fact, the text was written almost entirely while Anselm was in exile from England due to his staunch opposition to the country’s involvement in the crusades. Apparently, his correspondence with would-be crusaders was negative and discouraged military service. Concurrently, and perhaps more pressing to the theologian, the Eastern and Western Churches had officially and very recently split in 1054. In 1097 Pope Urban II summoned Anselm to “frame a rebuttal of the arguments of the Greeks who were attending the Council of Bari.” The two churches were attempting a reconciliation and Anselm was called in to help outline the Western church’s support of the “filoque” clause in the Nicene Creed. The majority of *Cur Deus Homo* was written while Anselm was at Bari and he was

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35 “Soldiers ought to abandon the worldly militia, for service in it [is] inherently sinful... enlist in the peaceful militia Christi.” The Militia Christi is Anselm’s term to describe the clergy, specifically monks. James Brundage, *The Crusades, Holy War, and Canon Law*, (Brookfield: Gower, 1991) 177.
almost certainly influenced by events at the council, an environment in which he would have been required to prove his faith.

*Cur Deus Homo* is structured as a dialogue between Anselm and Boso, an abbot and close friend of Anselm’s from the abbey at Bec.\(^{37}\) It is divided into two major parts. Part one deals with questions concerning humanity’s need for salvation: what is the nature of creation and what is humanity’s purpose in it? What is sin? Why can’t God just forgive sin? By the end of the section, Anselm brilliantly establishes Jesus not only as a necessary response to the need for salvation, but also as the only response to the issue. In part two, Anselm details how Jesus accomplishes this difficult task. Structuring the work as a dialogue as well as dividing it into two parts is not accidental; with Boso, Anselm gives voice to potential objections to his logic and the two part structure acts as a dramatic set-up, with the first posing a problem and the second offering a solution. Anselm even specifies that this format must be retained if the book is ever copied.\(^{38}\)

To understand Anselm’s argument in *Cur Deus Homo*, one must agree to Anselm’s view of God *a priori*. In an earlier theological treatise, the *Proslogion*, Anselm defines God as “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.”\(^{39}\) There is nothing in existence more just or loving than God,

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\(^{38}\) Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 262.

\(^{39}\) Anselm, “Proslogion”, 87.
making him perfect. “Being perfect, He does not will imperfect things.”  
Perfection does not refer to God’s merciful and loving nature, although he is both of these. God is perfect insofar as he cannot do wrong; it is categorically not in God’s nature. Logically, because he is perfect by nature, all that he does is, and can only be, fully good. Yet it is immediately evident that this construction of God is problematic considering the existence of sin in a world created by a supposedly perfect deity. How can a perfect God create a flawed world? 

According to Anselm, sin is not inherent in God’s creation, but an act of humanity. “To sin is nothing other than not to give God what is owed to Him.” Humans eternally owe God their wills. When humans refuse to give God their will, they fall into debt. Anselm’s use of transactional language in describing sin is not accidental. The language used to express humanity’s relation to God mirrors that used to describe the relation one might have to a money lender. There is biblical precedence for this. In the Old Testament the word used to describe the debt that one owes a lender is also the standard term for denoting a sin. “So you shall say to Joseph ‘remit... the debt of the sin [šā... lappeša] of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’” Similarly in the New Testament, a literal rendering of the “Our Father” prayer from the

44 Anderson, Sin, 27.
Greek causes one line to read “forgive us our οφειλήματα (debts) as we forgive those who οφειλέταις (hold debts) against us.”45 In the modern Roman Catholic service, the word “debt” is changed to “sin.” With such examples, one can understand that Anselm would have viewed original sin, humanity’s first and enduring break with God’s will, as a kind of debt requiring repayment.

It is here that the need for a savior begins to become evident to both Boso and the reader. Sinful humans are in debt to God and need to repay him. But this is problematic. Since God has created all that is and “owns” all of creation, humans are unable to repay God; they possess no “currency” with which they can repay him.46 All that man has is ruled and owned by God, making proper recompense impossible and the debt infinite. In the dialogue, the character Boso objects to God’s need for recompense, claiming that, since God owns everything, there should be no need for repayment and God should just bestow mercy.47 Anselm replies however that God demands satisfaction; he needs to receive back “the honor which [man] has violently taken from Him.”48 Were God simply to ignore this debt, he would be leaving sinners and non-sinners in equal standing before him.49 Such a move, Anselm reasons, would be unjust and, therefore, not perfect. In this manner, Anselm disproves

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45 Matthew 6:12.
46 Anderson, Sin, 190.
Boso’s claim that God could, by willing it, forgive humanity without exacting justice.

Anselm briefly entertains the possibility that God’s notion of justice might be able to change; that “if God wishes anything whatsoever that is unfitting, it is just, since it is He who wills it.”\textsuperscript{50} This statement seems true, since Anselm has already stated that “What God wills is just and what He does not will is unjust.”\textsuperscript{51} But Anselm is quick to point out that this does not mean God can make injustice just. As Anselm explains it, “the argument that, ‘If it is God’s will to tell a lie, it is just to tell a lie’… is non sequitur.”\textsuperscript{52} Such things are against God’s nature, which by definition is wholly good. A just God would never will a lie, because a lie is unjust. Moreover, insofar as God has total control of his creation, “it is not fitting for God to allow anything in His kingdom to slip by unregulated.”\textsuperscript{53} A lack of regulation, for example, letting a sin go unpunished, would diminish God’s justice. Therefore, it is unfitting and illogical for God simply to forgive.

This, however, presents yet another difficulty with respect to human sin. Anselm has established God as absolutely just. Therefore, God cannot ignore the debt owed by humanity to him. But humans have nothing that is not God’s. Only God can pay what is owed, but the debt lies with humans.\textsuperscript{54} If God were

\textsuperscript{50} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 285.
\textsuperscript{51} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 285.
\textsuperscript{52} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 285.
\textsuperscript{53} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 284.
\textsuperscript{54} Anderson, \textit{Sin}, 190.
to repay the debt for humans, his perfect justice would be compromised. But then again, leaving humanity to be subject to death, although just, conflicts with God’s perfect goodness as affirmed in the *Proslogion*. God’s justice and his goodness are now in conflict, which in turn compromises his perfection. Anselm is faced with a predicament that is apparently hopeless for both God and humans.

This dark problem is the turning point of Anselm’s narrative. The tables turn and humanity’s and God’s impossible predicament is solved by Jesus, who is both God and man. As a man, Jesus owes God the perfect obedience that is the responsibility of every human. As a man, he also bears the debt of human sin. As God, however, Jesus is not subject to the constraints of original sin that apply to all other humans. Unlike other humans, he is able to pay back the infinite debt because, as the only human capable of living out a sinless life, he should never have to die: “had [humanity] never sinned, [humans] would never die.” But, in a demonstration of God’s great love, Jesus willingly and freely chooses death, a punishment to which he justly should not have been subjected. As a sinless man, he does not owe God his death. And yet as God, his life is “an offering of infinite worth.” With this, Jesus is able to pay back the

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56 Anselm, “*Cur Deus Homo*”, 316.
57 Davies & Leftow, *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, 293.
infinite debt to God and humans are saved, so long as they live their lives in the name of Christ.\textsuperscript{58}

With \textit{Cur Deus Homo}, Anselm had laid out a theology of Jesus’ death in which God could simultaneously be perfect, just, omnipotent, and wholly good while extracting proper payment for humanity’s sins. Yet according to this model, it would have been sufficient for Jesus to die in any manner. Because he is the Son of God, one might presume this death to be swift and painless. However, all four gospels describe the final hours of Jesus’s life as excruciatingly painful; Jesus is whipped, made to wear a crown of thorns, and forced to drag a large wooden cross through the streets of Jerusalem after which he is nailed to the cross.\textsuperscript{59} All the while he is ceaselessly tormented by Roman soldiers, the Pharisees, and the local Judeans.\textsuperscript{60} Why would a perfect, just, and good God be so cruel in exacting payment from his own son?

This question was answered in the 13\textsuperscript{th} Century by Thomas Aquinas in his compendium of Christian teachings, the \textit{Summa Theologica}. The text is designed to contain all of the theological teachings of Christianity written for students of theology.\textsuperscript{61} Aquinas’s approach to theology, in contrast to Anselm’s, is consequential rather than ontological. For example, in his proof for God’s existence, Aquinas cites effects in nature as evidence rather than

\textsuperscript{58} Anderson, \textit{Sin}, 190.
pure reason. “The existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.”

This method is also a way in which Aquinas discusses sin. Not only does Aquinas view sin as an effect of an action, but “sins are actions.” An act may not only be described as sinful, but it is sinning. This is a marked departure from Anselm who only thought of sin as a stain on perfection. Aquinas instead sees humans as active agents of God. Therefore, any act that is in accordance with God’s will is virtuous while those that are not are sinful. “Sins are disordered actions.” There is no grey area; all deeds are bad or good, black or white.

Aquinas also classifies sins into two types: venial and mortal. For Aquinas, actions are means to goals. “Disorders in means to goals can be repaired by reconsidering… but a disordered ultimate goal has nothing more ultimate to repair it.” In other words, if the intent was good but the execution poor, the action may be considered venial. However, in a case where not only the action, but the intended goal is against God’s will, such an act is a mortal sin. Such a sin requires punishment.

Here especially is where Aquinas differs entirely from Anselm’s view of sin. Anselm’s view can be described as transactional. Sinful humans owe

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64 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 256.
God what was unjustly taken from him, namely “the honor... taken from Him.”\textsuperscript{66} But for Aquinas, sin subverts the whole transactional order. While all sins turn away from God, “a sin incurs... eternal punishment, insofar as it causes an irreparable disorder in the order of Divine justice, through being contrary to the very principle of that order.”\textsuperscript{67} Therefore, “according to the order of Divine justice, he who has been too indulgent to his will, by transgressing God's commandments, suffers, either willingly or unwillingly, something contrary to what he would wish.”\textsuperscript{68} Not only must the debt to God be repaid, but sinners must undergo suffering to repay this debt properly; only through suffering can order be restored.

Lastly, Aquinas believes that one may take on another’s punishment. Aquinas acknowledges that “it happens that one who has not sinned, bears willingly the punishment for another.”\textsuperscript{69} However, to assume another’s punishment is an act of love that can only be undertaken voluntarily. “Those who differ as to the debt of punishment may be one in will by the union of love.”\textsuperscript{70}

This is the basis of Aquinas’ theology of punishment and leads to a modified view of Jesus’s death and resurrection. Since, in Aquinas’s view, punishment for one’s sins can be commuted to another, Jesus not only dies to

\textsuperscript{66} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 283.
\textsuperscript{67} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 5.
\textsuperscript{68} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 6.
\textsuperscript{69} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 7.
\textsuperscript{70} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 7.
repay humanity’s debt to God as described by Anselm, but he is also punished and physically tormented in place of the punishment due to all humanity. Without this aggravated punishment, the disorder of the Divine justice could not be corrected, leaving God dishonored.\textsuperscript{71}

With this logic of sin and substitutionary atonement in place, I wish to return to a claim made by Anselm in the preface to \textit{Cur Deus Homo}. There, Anselm sternly asserts that “[My work] proves, by unavoidable logical steps, that, supposing Christ were left out of the case, as if there had never existed anything to do with him, it is impossible that, without him, any member of the human race could be saved.”\textsuperscript{72} What \textit{would} have been the fate of humanity had Christ never existed? How would humans attain salvation? Since, according to Anselm, a Christ figure was absolutely necessary for humans to gain salvation, humanity without Jesus would face eternal death. If we consider this fate in conjunction with Aquinas’s view on punishment, not only would humans deserve to die, but they would have to suffer through their deaths.

In Sondheim’s \textit{Sweeney Todd}, this medieval philosophical thought will be seen again, but with a twist. Such twisted thought may be mapped onto the musical’s plot to create the foundation of a new warped Christological model, particular to the musical.

\textsuperscript{71} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 5.
\textsuperscript{72} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 261.
"Deliver me, Lord from eternal death, on that dreadful day... when you come to judge the world through fire." – Requiem Mass

"The work waits, I’m alive at last, and I’m full of joy!" – Sweeney Todd, Sweeney Todd

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (hereafter referred to as Sweeney Todd), is a musical written by the American composer Stephen Sondheim and librettist Hugh Wheeler over the course of three years, from roughly 1977 to 1979. However, the story of the barber Sweeney Todd has roots in England as far back as the 18th Century. The popular urban legend of a barber who used his razor to murder his customers eventually became the basis for an 1847 penny-dreadful (a cheap serial publication) called The String of Pearls. This serial is the basis for a few elements of the 1979 musical, especially the names of the lead characters. For example, this was the first time the murdering barber was formally named “Sweeney Todd” and his landlady “Mrs. Lovett.” But overall, the plot of the musical is significantly different from the penny-dreadful and most of the characters are original additions.

The story of Sweeney Todd has had many artistic incarnations over the course of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries including several plays, four films, and even a ballet. Until the mid-20th Century, the basic elements of the story went unchanged. In most adaptations Sweeney murders his customers

74 Mack, The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd, Chapter 4.
and then hands them over to his landlady Mrs. Lovett to have them cooked into pies and sold to the public. Yet what is lacking in these adaptations and *The String of Pearls* is Sweeney’s motivation for his murders. He is depicted as unabashedly and unreasonably evil. In 1973, however, British playwright Christopher Bond penned an adaptation that expanded upon Sweeney’s background significantly. In this version, Sweeney Todd returns to London following fifteen years of imprisonment in a penal colony to find that the judge who wrongly imprisoned him has raped his wife (who proceeded to swallow poison) and raised his young daughter. Initially, Sweeney plans to avenge this wrong by killing the judge. Only after a failed attempt to kill the judge does Sweeney then vow to murder indiscriminately. 76 It is this version of the story that Stephen Sondheim saw in London in 1976 and chose to adapt into a musical.

According to the musical’s first director, Harold Prince, the emotions that dominate Sondheim’s adaptation are “Obsession, revenge, tragedy, [and] impotence.” 77 By impotence, Prince refers to the helplessness of the characters’ economic situation. All characters but the judge are poor and are easily manipulated by those with economic power. But while Prince alludes to the characters’ economic impotence, I believe the concept of impotence can also refer to a kind of spiritual impotence; that is, to their inability to escape the

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76 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 355.
violence and corruption of their physical world. In this chapter I aim to study ways in which the musical’s plot may be interpreted through a medieval Catholic lens, particularly drawing upon the writings of Anselm and Aquinas concerning the doctrines of sin and redemption. Such a reading illuminates surprising theological references in the libretto and allows for fascinating new interpretations of the plot and character motivations.

Sondheim’s musical begins in 19th Century London with the characters Anthony and Sweeney Todd returning from a long sea journey. As they dock their ship, it becomes clear that the two have not been acquainted very long. Anthony, a sailor, recovered Sweeney from a shipwreck only a few weeks ago. For most of the voyage home, Todd has been nearly mute. Once they have landed, Anthony inquires into Sweeney’s gloomy disposition, prompting Sweeney to briefly recount his past:

There was a barber and his wife,/and she was beautiful./A foolish barber and his wife,/she was his reason and his life./And she was beautiful,/and she was virtuous,/and he was naïve.78

Fifteen years earlier, Sweeney was known as Benjamin Barker, a youthful barber happily married with a child. When the lustful Judge Turpin developed a passion for Barker’s wife, Lucy, the judge sent Barker to a penal colony. Now Barker has returned under the pseudonym Sweeney Todd.

Telling Anthony that he will spend the coming weeks near Fleet Street, Todd sets off to discover the fate of his family. On Fleet Street he finds his old landlady, Mrs. Lovett, baker of “the worst [meat] pies in London.” Her news of his family’s fate is grim. While a dumb-show acts out the story she tells, Lovett vividly describes how, following Todd’s exile, Lucy was lured to the judge’s home under the pretense that he would release her husband. Upon arrival, she discovered a masquerade ball where the judge and Beadle Bamford (the judge’s assistant) raped her as the guests watched. Unable to deal with her grief, Lucy “poisoned herself [with] arsenic from the apothecary ‘round the corner” and the judge assumed guardianship of Johanna. On hearing this news, Sweeney vows that he will exact vengeance. “If I have to sweat in the sewers or in the plague hospital I’ll live and I’ll have them!”

Meanwhile, Anthony has his own encounter with Judge Turpin and the Beadle when he spots the teenage Johanna singing from her window. Anthony is immediately smitten by her beauty and, after being threatened by the Beadle for gawking at the young woman, Anthony declares that he will steal Johanna away from her guardian. Countering this declaration, Judge Turpin decides that he will marry Johanna the following week.

In preparation for his upcoming marriage to his ward, Turpin decides to visit a barber who, thanks to his success in a recent shaving contest, is being

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81 Sondheim & Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 44.
hailed as the best barber in London: Sweeney Todd. As the judge sits in the chair waiting to be shaved, Todd savors the moments before he exacts revenge; he whistles with the judge, lathers his face, and even sings a duet with him about pretty women. But at the song’s climax, just as Todd is about to exact his perfect vengeance, Anthony bursts into the barber shop. Recognizing Anthony as the same sailor who pursued Johanna earlier, the judge angrily storms out, declaring that he will never return.

Following the judge’s departure, Sweeney lashes out at Mrs. Lovett and announces that he “will get [the judge] back… in the meantime I’ll practice on less honorable throats.” Until he can exact his proper revenge, Todd will kill all men who enter his barbershop. As an entrepreneur, Mrs. Lovett coyly suggests they not waste the bodies, but instead use them as filling for her terrible meat pies. Within weeks, the pie shop is thriving.

The world depicted in Sweeney Todd is sickening at best. It is a place where beauty is squelched, justice is perverse, and life is full of cruelty and agony. Todd sums up the twisted social hierarchy of his world at the beginning of the play in direct contrast to Anthony’s view. While Anthony sees London as a place full of ringing church bells and compares the city to the mountains of Peru, Todd is quick to invert this view:

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83 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 163-169.
84 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 170.
85 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 178.
86 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 180-182.
There’s a hole in the world like a big black pit, and the vermin of the world inhabit it, and its morals aren’t worth what a pig could spit, and it goes by the name of London. At the top of the hole sit a privileged few, making mock of the vermin in the lower zoo, turning beauty into filth and greed… the cruelty of men is as wondrous as Peru, but there’s no place like London.87

If Anthony conceives of the world as mountainous, for Todd it is a pit. It is a world in which those in power (i.e., those at the top of the hole) lack any form of justice or mercy while those at the bottom of the hole are powerless to do anything but endure the tortures of the powerful. Todd has been sent into exile and Lucy gang raped in public without any way of attaining justice. Yet, as we learn later, even the powerful are not exempt from such torture and are incapable of achieving justice for themselves. In one scene, as self-punishment for his lust for Johanna, Judge Turpin flagellates himself shouting “mea maxima culpa!” while secretly watching the girl and masturbating.88 All forms of love and sexual pleasure become contorted in this view, so that even as he serves himself a “just” punishment, the judge continues to engage in the act that is the cause of his punishment. No matter one’s social class, from the top of the hole to its bottom, London is a city of animals, all living in constant agony.

_Sweeney Todd’s_ morbid tone is set by the prologue sequence: a burial. Onstage are two gravediggers and, although there is no funeral procession or

87 Sondheim & Wheeler, _Sweeney Todd_, 25.
body in sight, as the prelude continues the gravediggers “disappear gradually into the hole.” Soon, members of the company fill the stage singing “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd.” They are dressed in rags, look as if they are near death (or back from it), and, like a Greek Chorus, they invite the audience to “attend the tale of Sweeney Todd.” Overall, the song serves to create a dark mood for the piece. The underscore is unpredictable in its dynamics and the lyrics describe Todd’s grim characteristics and macabre practices: “his skin was pale and his eye was odd./He shaved the faces of gentlemen/who never thereafter were heard of again.”

The stage action reiterates this theme of gruesome death. Todd’s body is dumped into a grave which is soon surrounded by the chorus. As the scene progresses, the tempo and dynamics increase and the chorus members cacophonously and maniacally sing over each other. Finally, at the song’s climax, the chorus chants Sweeney’s name for twenty-two measures as Todd rises from the grave. The message is clear: this is a story about death, about a “pit” of a world, and at the center is Sweeney Todd. From this sequence, the audience has already learned that Todd is a murderer and that they will soon learn the details of his acts. However, although the group informs the audience of Todd’s grisly work habits and his eerie appearance, the prologue singers give almost no explanation for Todd’s horrific actions. Like the Sweeney of

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the penny-dreadful, the Sweeney of the prologue seems to murder for no reason at all.

The only glimpse of Sweeney’s motivation comes at the end of the prologue. As Sweeney rises from the grave he proclaims that “he served a dark and a vengeful God.” Further details about this God are not given, but from these two adjectives here, it seems that he is the opposite of the Christian God. While the Christian God is one of light and mercy, Sweeney’s is one of darkness and vengeance. Later in the musical, he is also described as a “hungry God” in need of satisfaction from his servant Sweeney. A dark, hungry, and vengeful deity certainly does not sound anything like the Christian God described by Anselm or Aquinas… or does it?

One chorus member, describing the deaths of Todd’s victims, half-jokingly asks “and what if none of their souls were saved?/They went to their Maker impeccably shaved.” At first glance, the line is equally humorous and macabre. Upon deeper reflection, however, it becomes more serious. We are told that none of the victims’ souls were saved. We will recall that in Cur Deus Homo, Anselm states that “supposing Christ were left out of the case, as if there had never existed anything to do with Him, it is impossible that, without

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92 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 16.
93 “Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.” Genesis 1:3-4.
94 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 316.
95 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 6.
Him, any member of the human race could be saved.” Furthermore, Aquinas claims that all sinners must suffer through punishment before they can attain salvation. For both these theologians, the wretchedness of humanity is resolved by Jesus’s suffering and death. Jesus endures all of the physical punishment humans deserve through his death and allows God to reconcile his justice (i.e., giving humanity what it deserves) with his mercy. But suppose Jesus were, as Anselm imagines, “left out of the case?” Then it makes perfect sense, as the chorus member testifies, that none of their souls would be saved. Without Jesus, there would be only justice and no mercy; death with no deliverance. This is the world that the characters in Sweeney Todd inhabit. In this light, the dark and vengeful God described in the prologue sequence is not so unfamiliar. He embodies an inversion of the Christian God described by Anselm and Aquinas: a god who demands human satisfaction for human sins.

In the first scene of the musical, Todd describes the London denizens as “the vermin of the world.” Although, at this point in the plot, Sweeney is intent on exacting revenge solely on the judge, his motivation for ultimately turning on all humans can arguably be discerned from this analogy. Humans are vermin and the only proper fate for vermin is extermination. The prologue makes it clear that Sweeney served a grim deity, but for most of the first act, his allegiance to the god begins quietly and develops slowly.

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97 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, Q. 87, Art. 6.
For the majority of act one Sweeney remains dormant. He spends his days planning, brooding, and waiting for the judge to arrive. After successfully winning a shaving contest with a rival barber, Sweeney persuades Beadle Bamford to visit his barber shop with the offer “to give [him] without a penny’s charge, the closest shave [he’ll] ever know.” It is a welcome surprise when, instead of the Beadle, Judge Turpin arrives. The morbid Todd begins to whistle happily and sing to himself. Throughout most of the first act, Sweeney Todd has bided his time waiting for the perfect moment to exact revenge on Judge Turpin. Mrs. Lovett has been able to mollify the anxious Sweeney for some time, at one point telling him “Soon will come/soon will last/wait/Don’t you know/silly man?/Half the fun is to/plan the plan./All good things/come to those who can/wait.” When Turpin finally arrives at Todd’s barbershop Sweeney is ready to act, but now he is bent on savoring every moment. Instead of a quick and painless murder, Todd aims to draw out the pain as well as its anticipation. His delay of action, however, allows Anthony to ruin the moment, bursting in and prompting Turpin to storm out. At this point, everything changes.

As Judge Turpin rushes from the barber shop, Sweeney violently demands that Anthony leave as well. When Mrs. Lovett asks what’s going on,
Sweeney is nearly speechless: “I had him… and then…” The stage direction reads “Todd stands motionless, in shock.” For him, the moment is almost illogical; the judge was before him waiting to be punished and yet did not die because Sweeney failed to act. Mrs. Lovett tries to lighten the situation, reprising her advice from the song “Wait,” but it is no use. Her melody is suddenly overtaken by Sweeney and the orchestra. Todd screams “I had him. His throat was bare beneath my hand… and he’ll never come again!” The brass instruments in the orchestra are thunderous, the strings are violent and unstable, and the score is marked _feroce_, “fierce.” Over the violent strings, Todd reasserts his claim from the first scene: “there’s a hole in the world like a big black pit, and it’s filled with people who are filled with shit, and the vermin of the world inhabit it… but not for long!” To quote the stage directions, “Todd’s insanity, always close to the surface, explodes finally.”

Todd immediately sums up his new, intensified philosophical outlook in the first two verses of the song “Epiphany.” He proclaims:

They all deserve to die!/Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett,/tell you why:/Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett,/there are two kinds of men and only two./There’s the one staying put in his proper place and the one with his foot in the other one’s face/Look at me, Mrs. Lovett, look at you/No, we all deserve to die!/even you Mrs.

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103 Sondheim & Wheeler, _Sweeney Todd_, 170.
104 Sondheim & Wheeler, _Sweeney Todd_, 170.
105 Sondheim & Wheeler, _Sweeney Todd_, 171.
106 Sondheim & Wheeler, _Sweeney Todd_, 172.
Lovett,/even I!/Because the lives of the wicked should be/made brief/for the rest of us
dead/will be a relief-/We all deserve to die!

This song, and in particular these lyrics, represent Todd’s most significant character transformation in the plot. For most of act one, his visage and demeanor have been unchanging with his only desire being to avenge himself upon the judge. But now, for the first time, Todd decides to put into practice a philosophy that has been brewing since the start of the story. Murder is no longer just about revenge, but about bringing an end to the pain and suffering of all the vermin in this disgusting world… through death.

In *Finishing the Hat*, Sondheim describes Sweeney as a man “[determined] to be a Sword of Justice.” The striking imagery has strong biblical implications, evoking the militant tone of the Book of Revelation. There, when Christ appears to his enemies to destroy them, he is described as “clothed in a robe dipped in blood… from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.”

With this imagery in mind, the song’s title of “Epiphany” gains greater significance. The definition of “epiphany,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has no secular connotations. There, an epiphany is defined as a “manifestation, [or] striking appearance, especially an appearance of a

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divinity.” Therefore it would seem that in this song there is such an appearance, or “revelation.” But then the question follows, if the dark god mentioned in the prologue is not discussed here, then who or what appears in the “Epiphany?”

In order to emphasize the intense change in Todd’s character following the judge’s escape, librettist Hugh Wheeler believed that “some kind of religious overtone might intensify Todd’s conversion into a mass murderer.” As we have seen in the prologue, religious overtones already pervade the musical from the very beginning. If we take seriously the earlier claim that Sweeney served a dark and vengeful god, then his conversion to mass murdering in the “Epiphany” is not so much a theological addition as it is inevitable. Because this god desires human satisfaction, Sweeney’s duty is not to resolve any divine conflict of interest, but to exact divine retribution. For Anselm, God sends Christ into the world where he willingly resolves the conflict between God’s justice and love. Sweeney’s god also sends a Christ into the world where he forces humans pay for their sins directly. Because Sweeney takes on this apparently inverted Christ role, I believe the divinity that appears in “Epiphany” is none other than Sweeney Todd himself.

112 Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, 355.
113 Davies & Leftow, The Cambridge Companion to Anselm, 293.
Todd’s transformation into a divine being does not mean that he is a god; we are told that “he served a dark and a vengeful God.” This language recalls the way Paul describes Christ in his letter to the Philippians: “Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God… [he] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Like Christ’s transformation in the incarnation, Todd’s is one in which he comes to take on the form of a slave. However, because the divinity of Sweeney’s world is so dark and twisted, its Christ is equally warped and perverse. Since the dark god lacks Anselm’s paradox, his Christ manifests itself not as one who tries to temper justice with mercy, but instead one who speeds up the process of divine justice. Todd’s “Epiphany” concludes with his enthusiastic vow that “the work waits/I’m alive at last/and I’m full of joy!” Thus he consummates his sacred purpose as the willing Christ of retribution.

In her analysis of the “Epiphany,” psychologist Judith Schlesinger claims that “Sweeney… recognizes a god, but this [god] is dark and delusional.” The focus of her analysis is on Todd’s psychological state and whether or not he loses his sanity over the course of the show. She sees the “Epiphany” as his final move into madness. “The music itself goes mad,

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114 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 16.
115 Philippians 2:7-8.
clashing and chaotic, and there is literally no rhyme as he loses his reason.”\textsuperscript{118} However, she never clarifies how he loses his reason, leaving the reader to assume that killing lots of people is inherently unreasonable. While Schlesinger is correct that Todd acknowledges a terrifying (one could even say “delusional”) god, her psychological assessment cannot apply to his dark theological framework or even his state of mind. We have already seen in Christian theology that it would not be illogical to remove God’s mercy and retain his justice. However bleak and warped this theological model may be, it is not at all delusional, but rooted in medieval Catholic thought. Sweeney’s god actually displays aspects of the Christian God specifically because he demands perfect justice, an attribute Anselm would certainly ascribe to God. Anselm claims that “it is impossible that, without [Jesus], any member of the human race could be saved.”\textsuperscript{119} In \textit{Sweeney Todd}, the protagonist merely takes Jesus’s place and replaces salvation with unmitigated justice.

Thus Sweeney Todd becomes the divine exterminator of the citizens of London. Throughout the second act, Todd mercilessly slits the necks of every customer to enter his shop (except one man who is luckily accompanied by his daughter) and the bodies are tossed down a chute into the cellar.\textsuperscript{120} Meanwhile his landlady wastes no time in profiting from the bloodshed, baking the victims’ corpses into her meat pies. By the opening song of the second act,

\textsuperscript{118} Schlesinger, “Psychology, Evil, and Sweeney Todd”, 132.
\textsuperscript{119} Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo”, 261.
\textsuperscript{120} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 256.
hosts of Londoners are now screaming maniacally for “more hot pies!/More hot! More pies!/More!”

As the play nears its end, Todd manages to lure the judge back to his barbershop and into his barber’s chair. This time, Todd will not let anything stop him. In fact, when a mad Beggar Woman breaks into the shop moments before the judge’s arrival, Sweeney quickly kills her to prevent a repeat of the scene from act one. Todd’s vengeance is complete as he slits the judge’s throat and tosses his body down the chute. It seems as if the musical could end here, but one shocking twist remains. When examining the bodies of the judge and the old woman, Sweeney is horrified to discover that the Beggar Woman is none other than his wife, Lucy, whom he had thought was dead.

Sweeney reels in anguish over his wife’s corpse exclaiming “oh my God!” while Mrs. Lovett hurriedly attempts to explain why she lied. “No, I never lied./Said she took the poison, she did/never said that she died,/poor thing,/She lived… better you should think she was dead./Yes, I lied ‘cuz I love you.” Distraught, Todd throws Mrs. Lovett into the bake oven. He then “moves back to the Beggar Woman and kneels, cradling her head in his arms,” and sings of his

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former life with Lucy.\textsuperscript{125} At this moment, Mrs. Lovett’s assistant Tobias comes across the bloody scene. Tobias has gone mad over the course of the second act, having learned that his beloved Mrs. Lovett has been grinding humans into meat pie filling. In a frenzy, he grabs the razor and slits Sweeney Todd’s throat. With bodies strewn across the stage, Tobias quietly “moves to the grinding machine and slowly starts to turn the handle” as the curtain falls.\textsuperscript{126}

It would seem that Sweeney’s death ruins his parallels to Christ. For Anselm and Aquinas, Christ suffers the physical punishment that humanity deserves and dies an innocent death as a sacrifice of infinite worth.\textsuperscript{127} As an infinitely valuable sacrifice, humanity’s infinite debt to God is fulfilled, which allows humans to gain salvation.\textsuperscript{128} Although Sweeney dies, the reason is unclear. He doesn’t die to resolve any theological conflict of interest. He merely despairs following the shocking revelation that he is his wife’s murderer. Even more unlike the Christ of Anselm and Aquinas, Todd isn’t resurrected… at least not in the story. But if, as I have argued, Sweeney is the dark and vengeful god’s equivalent of Christ, why must he suffer death?

In the last lines of the act one finale, “A Little Priest,” Todd and Lovett proudly exclaim “we’ll serve anyone,/meaning anyone,/and to anyone/at all!”\textsuperscript{129} Although it is quite macabre, the couple’s mission of murder is

\textsuperscript{125} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 359.  
\textsuperscript{126} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 361.  
\textsuperscript{127} Davies & Leftow, \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Anselm}. 293.  
\textsuperscript{128} Anderson, \textit{Sin}, 190.  
\textsuperscript{129} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 211-212.
surprisingly egalitarian. There will be no discrimination amongst the victims because, in their eyes, all are equal: “everybody goes down well with beer.”\textsuperscript{130} While Mrs. Lovett is primarily concerned with monetary profit, Todd’s concern is his egalitarian divine mission. In the “Epiphany,” Todd restates constantly that “[all humans] deserve to die.”\textsuperscript{131} At no point though, does he exclude himself. He actually insists that he deserves death as well.\textsuperscript{132} The fact remains that, despite his having become divine, Todd is still a man. Just like the Christian Christ, he is fully divine and human, equally god and man.\textsuperscript{133} As a god he is dark and vengeful with an insatiable appetite for divine justice. But as a human, he inherently deserves to die and is subject to the same punishment he has administered to his victims throughout the musical.

During all of the murders in the musical, Sweeney is noticeably cold and disconnected from his actions. In the second act, he laments his daughter’s imprisonment by the judge while almost unknowingly slitting the throats of his customers.\textsuperscript{134} His only expressions of feeling seem to be 1) his endless hunger for revenge and 2) his excitement when he attains it, both of which are characteristics of his god. In this light (or is it darkness?) the inner conflict of interest becomes apparent. Sweeney wants to kill everyone indiscriminately, but, as he states in the “Epiphany,” “we all deserve to die./Even you Mrs.\textsuperscript{130} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 203.\textsuperscript{131} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 175.\textsuperscript{132} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 174.\textsuperscript{133} Anselm, “\textit{Cur Deus Homo}”, 316, 325.\textsuperscript{134} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 245-261.
Lovett, even I!” Sweeney will have to pay the price for his humanity and eventually suffer the fate of his victims.

Sweeney’s acknowledgement of his inevitable death occurs during the final scene of act two. Sweeney experiences a second revelation when he discovers the body of his wife Lucy whom he loves, and whom he has killed. Her murder is not so much the reason that Todd dies as it is the trigger. It is the acknowledgment of his pain following her death that reminds us of his humanity and leads to his demise. Holding his wife’s body in his arms awakens two entirely new emotions in Todd: grief and regret, two ungodly human emotions. This moment prompts the second conversion but it is nowhere near as grand as his appearance as a divine being in “Epiphany.” Here, Todd’s conversion is the opposite. He moves from the divine to the human. Now diminished, he merely cries out “Oh my God! Lucy! What have I done?” His conversion is such a reversal of his initial transformation that his final lines before death are the same as his opening lines. “There was a barber and his wife,” Todd sings to himself, “and she was beautiful... and he was,” Todd concludes, “naïve.” He has naively attempted to deny his humanity until it finally manifests itself in his arms. As a man, he is just as guilty of the

137 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 359.
wretchedness described in scene one and in the “Epiphany.” The stark and unchanging truth is that “we all deserve to die.”\textsuperscript{138}

Even though a just god without mercy is entirely logical, it remains problematic for humanity. If Todd’s credo is true, then after all the bloodshed is finished, what is left? Nothing. Unlike the Christian Christ, there is no resurrection of the servant and no salvation for humanity. Death is the end, a fate justly reserved for everyone. Anselm reasons that “had [humanity] never sinned, [humans] would never die.”\textsuperscript{139} Sweeney’s strictly just god is fully in accordance with this thought. Therefore, because of humanity’s sinfulness and without the chance for resurrection, the dark god of \textit{Sweeney Todd} forces his world to self-destroy. Without mercy, there is no way to alleviate the sufferings of London’s denizens and their big black pit only becomes filthier and more torturous. Only the annihilation of everything will stop the pain and suffering. As eagerly as Mrs. Lovett’s customers devour her pies, the nihilistic, dark, vengeful, and hungry god devours his creation once it loses its perfection, consuming everything that deserves death, even his own Christ.

For the nihilistic god, the loss of Sweeney is a minor setback. His death, although inevitable, is not a serious issue. The god will simply have to anoint a new exterminator… something actually hinted at in the final moments of the

\textsuperscript{138} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 175.

\textsuperscript{139} Anselm, ”Cur Deus Homo”, 316.
show. For, even as the curtain falls, Tobias can be heard quietly muttering to himself, “there’s work to be done. So much work to be done.”¹⁴⁰

Sequence

“What dread there will be when the Judge shall come to judge all things strictly.”
-Requiem Mass

“[The concept musical] is primarily a director’s theater... in which the director decides first what the concept to be explored is.”  -Justin S. Smith, Music Thesis

Through a primarily textual analysis, the previous chapter proves how the world of Sweeney Todd can be interpreted through a warped Christological framework based on the writings of Anselm and Aquinas. But Sondheim’s lyrics do not stand alone; this is, after all, a musical, and as such the lyrics are constantly interacting with both the music and the stage action. If the lyrics alone create such a dark and devastating world, what horrors does the music conjure? More importantly, how does the music deepen, or even change the lyrical message? It is entirely possible that the lyrics might say one thing while the music communicates something completely different. In addition, directors have had freedom to interpret the libretto in various ways, emphasizing different aesthetics. In order to develop the clearest picture of Sweeney Todd as a whole, it is therefore important 1) to study how the lyrics interact with the music and 2) to see how the musical has been directed historically. I will show how Sondheim’s marriage of the music and lyrics forms a surprisingly distinct message. In fact, the theological reading supported by the second chapter is enhanced by Sondheim’s choice of musical structures and melodies. Most notably, through these analyses, it can be demonstrated how the warped
Christological framework outlined in the second chapter is reaffirmed through the composer’s use of Gregorian chant and Wagnerian leitmotifs.

**Musical Analysis**

*Sweeney Todd*’s score is constructed according to the musical system known as leitmotifs. Leitmotifs are short musical phrases that may be identified with characters, settings, events, or even ideas. An example from *Sweeney Todd* is the theme that plays when the Beggar Woman first appears: two quarter notes, D-sharp and D (Fig. 3). For the rest of the musical, her onstage appearance is almost always accompanied by these two notes to which she sings “alms, alms!” 141 Not only do the notes D-sharp and D evoke her character, but descending half-notes of any kind may represent her as well. For this particular motif, it is not the exact notes but the *interval* between the notes that suggest the Beggar Woman.

This particular approach to leitmotifs can most aptly be called Wagnerian. In the mid-19th Century, opera composer Richard Wagner championed a new kind of leitmotifs which utilized a psychological approach. In Wagner operas, themes do not stand independent of one another, but interact to create more complex psychological ideas. For example, in Wagner’s opera *Götterdämmerung*, the shifty character Hagen greets the hero Siegfried,

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joyously singing “hail Siegfried, dearest hero.” However, the melody to which Hagen sings his greeting is associated with a negative leitmotif, that of an evil curse. The lyrics say one thing while the music says something totally contrary. While Hagen’s greeting is positive, the dark underscore implies the hidden motives of the character. The juxtaposition allows the character’s true motivation to be inferred through musical interpretation rather than explicit acting or dialogue. For Wagner, this kind of art that synthesizes music, book, lyrics, and other theatrical elements, is known as a Gesamtkunstwerk: a total work of art. Such a work is one “whose elements are beholden to each other for style and content rather than to expectations based on their separate or corporate conventions.”

In the 20th Century, the Wagnerian use of leitmotifs has come to be commonly associated with film scores. Movies like Jaws, Star Wars, and even the Harry Potter film series, all with scores by John Williams, are filled with leitmotifs. Sondheim himself has cited the music of film music composer Bernard Herrmann (composer for North by Northwest and Psycho) as one of the most significant influences on his score for Sweeney Todd. Specifically, Herrmann’s music for the 1945 film Hangover Square is a direct inspiration for the initial underscore during Sweeney Todd’s prologue sequence. When one

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considers the impact of leitmotifs in film music, Wagner’s concept of “total artwork” becomes recognizable in a modern context. The intense synesthesia, or multi-sensual experience, of music, visuals, and imagination is the epitome of what Wagner intended with his Gesamtkunstwerk. Upon hearing the interval of a rising minor-second in the 1975 film Jaws, one immediately imagines a giant shark. A similar experience is prompted in Sweeney Todd. In fact, Sondheim has said “what I wanted to write... was a horror movie.”¹⁴⁵ In his view, films like Jaws place music at the forefront, with the score being the most important tool in scaring the viewer. As Sondheim explains to Craig Zadan in Sondheim & Company, “you don’t have to see a single shark’s tooth in Jaws... you hear all those double basses, you get frightened right away.”¹⁴⁶

Leitmotifs have also been used in some musical scores, most notably Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story (for which Sondheim wrote the lyrics). The song “Maria,” is a good example (Fig. 4).¹⁴⁷ The two consecutive intervals of a tritone and a minor-second are constantly repeated in conjunction with Maria’s name until they come to represent her character over the course of the musical. However, the motif remains mostly independent. Except for a few brief moments late in the musical, Maria’s leitmotif rarely interacts with the other themes in West Side Story. Therefore, the Wagnerian use of leitmotifs, while not entirely unprecedented in American musical theater, reaches its

¹⁴⁶ Zadan, Sondheim & Company, 246-247.
zenith in *Sweeney Todd*. Like their purpose in Wagner’s operas, these leitmotifs are not meant to stand independently of one another. Rather, they interact with lyrics and stage drama highlighting subtleties, hidden meanings, and changes in characters and ideas. Therefore, understanding their relationship to one another and interpreting their interaction with the lyrics and the drama is paramount to reading *Sweeney Todd* as a total work of art.

There are numerous leitmotifs in *Sweeney Todd*, some frequent, some infrequent, and some that only appear twice. As discussed above, leitmotifs can be associated with characters (the shark in *Jaws*), settings (Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*), events (the “shower scene” in *Psycho*), or ideas (the Force in *Star Wars*). In *Sweeney Todd*, the motifs are all closely related to one another, elucidating the relationships between characters. One example is how the theme’s for the characters Lucy (Fig. 5), Judge Turpin (Fig. 6), and Johanna (Fig. 7) are interconnected. The judge’s theme consists of two rising intervals; a major-second and a minor-second. But this theme is also the musical inversion of Lucy’s motif. Johanna’s theme too is an extension of the interval pattern from the judge’s theme; hers is a minor-third followed by a major-second while his is an ascending major and then minor-second (the intervals progressively decrease in size). The close relation of these three themes mirrors the sexual and affective relationship among the three characters

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(the judge has raped Lucy and hopes to seduce the other, her daughter). In Sondheim’s words, “these may seem like subtleties that nobody gets, but it creates a mood.”\textsuperscript{150} While the connections among these themes may be only subconsciously audible, investigation into their musical structures reveals the hidden relationship. The score also uses overlapping melodies in order to create psychological associations between characters. One of the best examples is during the final scene, when Todd discovers that the Beggar Woman he has killed is his wife, Lucy. Following the initial shock, the underscore begins to play two themes over one another: the Beggar Woman’s descending half-notes, and Lucy’s motif (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{151} Musically, the two motifs combine to form a new synthesized one representing the newly “revealed” character.

But perhaps the most important leitmotif to form in \textit{Sweeney Todd} is heard in the opening bars of the musical’s organ prelude, a piece which precedes the prologue (Fig. 9).\textsuperscript{152} These four chords can be deconstructed to a reduced non-chord sequence of four descending notes (Fig. 10). Compare that descending phrase to the basic notes that make up the \textit{Dies Irae} melody from the Catholic Requiem Mass (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{153} The first four chords of \textit{Sweeney Todd} are actually the notes from the \textit{Dies Irae} with the repeated notes removed, thereby creating a strictly descending musical phrase, a downward tetrachord.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{150} Interview with Stephen Sondheim, YouTube video, 5:00, from a televised documentary about the Original London Production, Aired 1980, posted by “nolubay”, January 6, 2008, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kplPfv78scl}.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 351.
\item \textsuperscript{152} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Chase, \textit{Dies Irae}, 509-510.
\end{itemize}
According to musicologist Stephen Banfield, “this downward scale of a fourth can therefore be considered the root of Sweeney Todd’s thematic material.”\textsuperscript{154} As the “root” of the musical, the Dies Irae is not only the first leitmotif expressed in Sweeney Todd. The motif can also be found repeatedly throughout the score, is frequently used to represent Todd’s wife, Lucy, and is even hidden in some vocal lines during chorus numbers.

In the prelude alone, the Dies Irae takes multiple forms. As previously mentioned, it is expressed as a descending musical phrase in the first two measures. While this phrase occurs only four times, the Dies Irae is also directly quoted at length from measures 13 to 17, and is repeated from measure 26 to the end of the prelude totaling seven direct quotations (measures 26 to 34 actually cite the first two phrases of the theme). At this point, the prelude is abruptly cut short by “the deafening shrill sound of a factory whistle.”\textsuperscript{155} As the prologue progresses, the Dies Irae citations grow more frequent and, according to the score, the tempo increases to a “loco” (literally, crazy) pace.\textsuperscript{156} It is as if the music is aware of the maddening world the audience is about to enter and is preparing the audience for the assault of death that will soon follow.

Except for the prelude, the Dies Irae is (almost) never directly cited again. But by no means does it vanish. It merely goes into hiding and can be

\textsuperscript{154} Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 297.
\textsuperscript{155} Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 3.
\textsuperscript{156} Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 3.
found in disguised forms throughout many songs. For example, in the prologue, as Sweeney’s body is tossed into the grave, the chorus sings the melody of the *Dies Irae*. Considering the stage action, a funeral theme is fully appropriate. But the melody is moved to the Lydian mode. In other words, the melody ends three scale degrees above the original theme while the original tonic note is retained in the bass line. The result is a sound that *feels* like the *Dies Irae*, but is not quite right (Fig. 11).\textsuperscript{157} The theme plays in a hidden form before Sweeney rises from his grave. However, when Sweeney rises and tells the audience, “what happened then?/Well that’s the play/and he wouldn’t want us/to give it away,” the *Dies Irae* can be heard clearly pronounced in the underscore (Fig. 12).\textsuperscript{158} The music can therefore be considered a preliminary answer to Todd’s ominous question; what happened then? A lot of judgment and vengeance.

Another example is when Sweeney is given his old razors from his former life. He sings an eerie love song to the blades, “My Friends,” telling them “we’ll do wonders/won’t we?” and “you’ll soon drip rubies./You’ll soon drip precious/rubies.”\textsuperscript{159} The song’s central melodic motif is none other than the infamous *Dies Irae* in disguise (Fig. 13).\textsuperscript{160} Here, however, Sondheim scrambles the notes. Instead of the notes occurring in the order *one*, *two*, *three*, *four*, they are played *four*, *two*, *four*, *one/three* (notes one and three are the

\textsuperscript{158} Sondheim & Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{159} Sondheim & Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 53-54.
\textsuperscript{160} Sondheim & Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 52.
same pitch). In addition, the contour of this scrambled melodic line is identical to the original Dies Irae’s, except it is reversed. By retaining the contour, the effect is, as in the prologue, that the melody sounds like the Dies Irae, but something seems off. In “My Friends,” the effect is used more than once. Later in the song, when Todd and Lovett join together for a duet portion (in which he sings to the razors, and she sings to him), they repeat the scrambled motif in an ascending pattern. “Soon you’ll know splendors/you never have dreamed/all your days.”¹⁶¹ Because Todd begins a measure before Lovett, he always sings a major-third above her. The harmony sounds beautiful, but the scrambled Dies Irae beneath them conveys a distinct message: this duo will bring about repeating and rising chords of death. At the song’s conclusion, the orchestra plays the same rising motif until Todd raises his blade above his head and maniacally exclaims, “At last! My arm is complete again!” Suddenly, the chorus bursts onstage to proclaim “Lift your razor high Sweeney/hear it singing ‘Yes!’”¹⁶² (Fig. 14) The proclamation is sung to the Lydian Dies Irae from the prologue. Again, the basic musical foundation is there, but the structure keeps the theme hidden.

The Dies Irae is even woven into certain choral numbers, such as the transition after Sweeney’s shaving contest with a rival barber (Fig. 15).¹⁶³ There, the basses and baritones harmonize with the main melody using the

¹⁶¹ Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 55-56.
¹⁶² Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 57-58.
¹⁶³ Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 113.
Dies Irae while the upper voices overpower the lower voices. Thus, although the melody is unaltered and fully pronounced, the Dies Irae remains hidden due to the tonal power of the woman and higher men. In “God, That’s Good,” the four note phrase is at its most warped. It is split between two choral voices, amongst seven vocal lines, sung in reverse, and moved to the Dorian mode. Despite its being almost unrecognizable, its meaning is no less important, for it appears as the main characters are discussing the new (human infused) meat pies while the chorus hungrily shouts “yum!” In the same way human flesh is unconsciously being consumed by the chorus, so is the Dies Irae unconsciously heard by the audience. It is so subtle it’s nearly indistinguishable. But for one who is looking, it can be found.

It will be helpful at this point to return to the text of the Dies Irae. Recall that it can be divided into two overarching themes. The first is that of damnation, focusing on harsh and wrathful judgment. The second theme is redemption; the poem’s speaker pleads with God that Jesus will remember him on this Judgment Day, evoking Jesus’s suffering on the cross. Despite this thematic juxtaposition, there are two linguistic motifs that pervade both halves of the piece. First, fire and ash are referenced throughout, appearing in several stanzas espousing both themes. On the one hand, wrath and vengeance (“Day of wrath, that day/will dissolve the world in ashes.”), and, on the other, mercy and forgiveness (“once the cursed have been rebuked/sentenced to acrid

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164 Sondheim & Wheeler, Sweeney Todd, 232.
flames/call thou me with the blessed.”). A second similar motif is the constant repetition of the words judge and judgment: “Just judge of revenge/give the gift of remission/before the day of reckoning.” As mentioned earlier, the judge appears vastly different from the loving God described by Anselm. Anselm’s God knows humans deserve death but instead of exacting that satisfaction, sends Jesus into the world to take on humanity’s debt. Conversely, the Dies Irae’s judge appears to be violently just without mercy. But we have already discussed how such strict judgment is in the Christian God’s nature. It is only love that mollifies his judgmental tendency, something Sweeney’s dark and vengeful god completely lacks. In Sweeney Todd, as discussed in the previous chapter, Sweeney becomes a Christ-figure, a “just judge of revenge/[giving] the gift of remission” while his victims are “sentenced to acrid flames” in Mrs. Lovett’s bake oven. Remove all references to Jesus, and this poem could easily become Todd’s anthem; a modified Dies Irae that describes only judgment and retribution.

But that Dies Irae is already the anthem for Todd’s warped theological outlook. Think about the “Epiphany,” which I have already shown to be central in understanding the musical’s inverted Christological model. During the first two verses, as Sweeney sings that we all deserve to die, the trombones hammer

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165 Chase, Dies Irae, 5-6.
166 Chase, Dies Irae, 6.
167 Chase, Dies Irae, 6.
out the *Dies Irae* theme in the underscore *six* times (Fig. 16).\(^{168}\) This is quickly followed by the descending tetrachord (first heard in the prelude), sung by Sweeney and played in the orchestra together, in unison. The tetrachord is heard an incredible *eighteen* times in forty measures as Todd sings about his lost daughter, his dead wife, and his anticipation of the coming murders. In conjunction with the straightforward quotations of the piece, the *Dies Irae* can be heard in the “Epiphany” a total of *twenty-four* times. I do not believe it is coincidence that, in a piece so central to the inverted framework set forth in the previous chapter, the *Dies Irae* plays so often and can be heard so clearly.

Perhaps most interesting is how foundational the *Dies Irae* is for Sondheim’s musical composition in *Sweeney Todd*. In reference to the *Dies Irae*’s four signature notes, Sondheim has stated, “Those four notes determine the entire structure of the piece.”\(^{169}\) Regardless of its historical roots, the *Dies Irae* is the musical groundwork for everything in *Sweeney Todd*. Whether or not it was intended by the composer (a possibility to be discussed later), the *Dies Irae* and its theological history pervade and haunt all aspects of *Sweeney Todd*. At the very least, understanding the historic and theological background of the *Dies Irae*, in conjunction with Sondheim’s Wagnerian leitmotif structure, opens a new way of understanding and interpreting the musical revealing new character motivation and story meaning.

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\(^{169}\) Podcast, “Sweeney Todd”. 
Production History

For all the *Dies Irae’s* importance, it is not the only mechanism through which a viewer or a director might understand *Sweeney Todd*. After all, one can interpret the story and its elements through a variety of lenses; socio-economic, political, psychological, and philosophical approaches are all valid and fascinating ways to study the story and its characters.

Earlier, I dubbed *Sweeney Todd* a total work of art, but that is a slight misnomer. A *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as advocated by Wagner, strives to promote a central idea by the work’s creator. Unlike Wagner though, Sondheim has no messages or concepts to promote through his work. For this reason, one can interpret the musical without regard for the composer. The more appropriate term for *Sweeney Todd* would therefore be a “concept musical.” In defining concept musicals, musicologist Stephen Banfield is quick to point out that they “imply a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk.*”170 And indeed, like a total work of art, they draw together various dramaturgical aspects such as music, lyrics, and other theatrical techniques. But, unlike a total work of art, the concept musical does *not* convey some central message from the composer. Rather, according to former Wesleyan student Justin S. Smith, the concept musical “is primarily a director’s theater… in which the director decides first what the concept to be explored is, and then attempts to have this expressed in

170 Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 147.
all the various aspects of the production.” Therefore, each new staging allows for new interpretations and draws from different aspects of the musical.

For the 1979 production, *Sweeney Todd*’s original director, Harold Prince, focused on the socio-economic struggles of the characters and the intense influence of the industrial revolution on Sweeney Todd in his production. Prince points out how “Sweeney is referred to in mechanistic terms: ‘Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned/ Like a perfect machine ‘e planned.’ … He has become a cog in the Great Machine. His soul is replaced with whirring belts and whining gears.” That production was epic in proportions, including an onstage reassembled Rhode Island foundry and a hydraulic-fueled set operated by both stagehands and actors.

In direct contrast, for the 2005 Broadway revival, director John Doyle took a minimalist approach to the story which emphasized the characters’ inner psychological madness rather than their outer, working-class, oppression. As described by *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley, the action was “Set in a bleak wooden box of a room that suggests an underfinanced psych ward in limbo; this show begins with a white-faced young man in a straitjacket, surrounded by people in institutional white coats.” The production was so sparse that the actors even played their own instruments, reducing the orchestrations from twenty-seven instruments to a mere ten. The overall effect:

intimate psychological terror. The acting styles in both productions were also vastly different. In 1979, actors Len Cariou (Todd) and Angela Lansbury (Lovett) were melodramatic, their interpretations almost caricatures. For the stark 2005 production, leads Michael Cerveris and Patti LuPone took much more muted approaches to their characters, almost never speaking or singing above a hush. The contrast between this production and the original 1979 one is stark and highlights the varying ways one may interpret Sweeney Todd to various effects. On the one hand, Prince chose to emphasize political and interpersonal struggles and relationships, while Doyle’s production focused on the inner madness of most of the characters. Regardless of how the story is thematically interpreted however, there are particular aesthetic elements that remain constant in both productions.

In the original Broadway production, to the left of the stage stood an organ used to play the opening prelude. Although the organ was eliminated in subsequent re-stagings of the original New York production during the national tour, the original production can be seen in archival footage held in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.174 While the organ is not even on the main stage, it is both visually and musically important for the prelude as well as select scenes in which organ is used in the underscore. It is fashioned after an old church organ with long air pipes rising up ominously over the

174 Archive Footage, Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, Uris Theater Production, 1979, (Cited with permission from the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, TOFT Archives).
organist. Upon the organ pipes is fastened a large plaque that reads a surprising message: “The Blood of Jesus Christ His Son Cleanseth us from all Sins.”\textsuperscript{175} The plaque is almost out of place; in the midst of an American musical, set in 19\textsuperscript{th} Century London, in a production emphasizing the Dickensian conditions of its characters, a message straight from medieval theology is positioned for all to see. Each time the organ plays the bleak \textit{Dies Irae}, one glance reminds the viewer of Jesus’s sacrifice… for us. As for the characters onstage, “well, that’s a different matter.”\textsuperscript{176} The characters reside in a world contrary to ours, a world in which nothing “cleanseth us from all sins” except direct retribution. Offstage, God’s justice is tempered with mercy. Onstage, Sweeney’s “dark and vengeful god” craves direct satisfaction. It is a world where Sweeney Todd judges all strictly and the “Day of Wrath” runs rampant.

While the offstage organ plaque in 1979 directly references Jesus Christ, the 2005 revival could be considered even more overt in its Christian message. Upstage, at the back of the set, stands a large structure of shelves more than two stories tall. On the many levels rest a wide assortment of knick-knacks and objects of curiosity: tiny cooking pots, a preserved hand, and even a phrenology head. But one object dominates all the others at the peak of the

\textsuperscript{176} Sondheim & Wheeler, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, 156.
shelves. At the summit of the collection rests a large crucifix. Because the set does not change, the image of a bleeding Jesus watches solemnly over all the stage action from the first murder to the final bloodbath. It is strangely clinical, as if the Christian God is watching all the madness in the same way a doctor might observe a patient in a psychiatric ward (perfectly in line with the director’s interpretation). While, in our world, Jesus is resurrected to overcome death, this Jesus merely hangs on the cross helplessly while the characters endure Sweeney’s wrath.

But neither Prince nor Doyle has ever discussed religious themes in *Sweeney Todd*. Like the pipe organ in the 1979 production, the Christian themes in the 2005 revival are not the center of attention, nor are they the focal point of the director’s design. Instead, these elements exist on the peripheries, only significant to the audience should they choose to glance that direction. Do the directors perceive the religious themes expounded in this and the previous chapter? Most likely not. However, one really doesn’t need to analyze the text or leitmotifs in order to suspect that this story’s themes resonate with central Christian beliefs.

The first half of the *Dies Irae* focuses on the need for humans to receive divine retribution for their sins. Anselm too acknowledges this requirement, stipulating that, were it not for the efforts of a merciful God through Christ, the

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judge described so vividly in the Dies Irae would exact divine retribution from all humans. This is the world of Sweeney Todd. Todd may not be the salvation desired by the London citizens, but he provides a required salvation: retribution that is both harsh and painful. And while he is dark, vengeful, and hungry, Sweeney’s god demands satisfaction so that the world may be rid of pain and suffering. The truth is, this dark god’s final goal is not so different from that of the judge’s in the Dies Irae. The final line of the poem reads “Lord, grant them rest.” Similarly, albeit via a very different route, Sweeney’s god seeks to bring about an end to misery and grant all humans the rest of death. Sweeney’s credo is succinct and true: we all deserve to die.

178 Chase, Dies Irae, 6.
The central questions of this thesis originated in the spring of 2010 when I was cast as the sailor Anthony in Second Stage’s production of *Sweeney Todd*. During the rehearsal months, I was able to examine the score in detail as I practiced daily with other cast members and the musicians. It was during those rehearsals that I first noticed the four note tetrachord established in the first bars of the opening prelude. I was struck by how often those chords appeared in the score and I was curious about their significance.

As a fan of the composer, I knew Sondheim always composed with purpose. This was a man who had once written an entire musical in varying waltz rhythms to reflect the way the three main couples were “dancing” with (teasing) their sexual partners.\(^\text{179}\) I soon determined that the tetrachord was based on the notes of the *Dies Irae*, as discussed in the previous chapter. It surprised me that Sondheim would include a distinctly Catholic melody so often in *Sweeney Todd*. In Sondheim’s biography, he emphasizes his own lack of exposure to religion until his early twenties.\(^\text{180}\) Additionally, the secondary sources that I consulted failed to say anything else about the melody except that it was used to create a creepy mood. Then, in Joanne Gordon’s book, *Art Isn’t Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*, I found a surprising description

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\(^{179}\) The “waltz musical” is *A Little Night Music*. Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*. 253.

of the set for the original Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd*. It detailed the onstage organ with the plaque regarding the blood of Jesus Christ. I wondered, was there more meaning to the *Dies Irae* than meets the ear? Does the *Dies Irae*’s Catholic background help create a new understanding of the musical’s story and, if so, how is this idea communicated through the music’s interaction with the stage action?

I spent the summer researching these questions, focusing on medieval theology and current materials containing accounts from Sondheim himself. As Sondheim is a contemporary composer, there is no shortage of books, biographies, and articles containing interviews with the artist describing his works in extreme detail. But by the end of summer, although I had literally exhausted all primary sources from the Wesleyan libraries, I was still dissatisfied. Despite the various authors and interviewers, none addressed my questions. So I decided to ask the composer personally.

From what I knew, there were countless degrees of separation between Sondheim and me, so I was sure my efforts to interview him would be a long-shot. I tried to get in contact with the artist by asking friends of friends of friends for help. But by early July, after two months of probing personal networks and connections, it seemed that I was no further than I had been in May.

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181 Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 211.
Suddenly, on July 14, 2010, I received an email with the subject heading “From Stephen Sondheim.” After reading the first sentence, there was no reason to read further. “Your request reached me through the good offices of James Lapine, and I would be happy to meet with you.”182 My family’s former neighbor turned out to be a personal friend of James Lapine, a frequent collaborator on Sondheim’s shows in the 1980s.

Needless to say, Sondheim’s offer was unlike any I’d ever had. I was to have the opportunity to discuss my undergraduate thesis about Sweeney Todd with the composer at his private residence. The prospect was both exhilarating and terrifying. Since the start of summer I had spent time studying the score and reading medieval theology and was sure that the thesis would focus especially on Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo, Sondheim’s “Epiphany” sequence, and the Dies Irae theme that ties the two bodies together. By the time of my scheduled meeting with Sondheim, my thesis was essentially outlined and I was certain that the interview would merely support what I believed to be concrete findings regarding the libretto and score. Even Professor Rubenstein thought that, at the very least, Sondheim would be aware of the writings of Anselm and Aquinas.183

The morning before we met, I emailed Mr. Sondheim the thesis proposal I had written for the religion department the previous spring. Until

182 Stephen Sondheim, email to Christopher Ceccolini, July 14, 2010.
183 Dr. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, email to Christopher Ceccolini, August 23, 2010.
then he had known nothing about my stance on the material and I didn’t want him to be unprepared. His response that afternoon was surprising:

I’ve just read your proposal and I feel I must warn you: I had no religious intentions whatsoever in utilizing the Dies Irae in "Sweeney Todd." I have in fact no interest in religion at all, except a rather dim view of it. My intentions were strictly to use the tune as the menacing theme it has become over the years in movies ("Sweeney Todd" is nothing but a stage version of a movie thriller, after all, and I wanted to use the music exactly as suspense movies use it.).\textsuperscript{184}

I couldn’t believe it. Here was the same approach to the Dies Irae that I had encountered with other composers like John Williams and Berlioz: Sondheim apparently believed the tune was inherently menacing. The response left me shaken. If Sondheim was so sure religion was not a part of Sweeney Todd, was my thesis topic still valid? Maybe I was over-thinking the material. I was also worried Sondheim believed I was trying to appropriate his work for a religious cause; he made a point of telling me that he had a “dim view” of religion. I responded quickly, saying that I was a musicologist as well as a student of religion and that my interview would emphasize music, not theology.

The next day I met with Mr. Sondheim at his home in New York. He was nothing like what I expected; unlike the well dressed man of televised interviews, he dressed in pajama pants and a sweatshirt. On his feet he wore moccasins, which he flaunted by propping them on the coffee table as we talked. In contrast, my tie made me feel awkwardly overdressed. Having been

\textsuperscript{184} Stephen Sondheim, email to Christopher Ceccolini, August 23, 2010.
through hundreds of interviews, he was more than relaxed, slouching into the
couch and drinking white wine out of a milk glass. I drank water, but could
have used the wine to unwind; my nerves were on edge and I had to speak
more slowly than usual to be sure that I didn’t slur or mumble my words. It
wasn’t a dream, but the situation felt surreal. I sat with Sondheim in the living
room of his Manhattan brownstone, discussing Sweeney Todd’s leitmotif
structures, the show’s Wagnerian and film influences, and even discussed
Wesleyan’s recent Second Stage production of the musical from May 2010.¹⁸⁵
His comments were extremely insightful and I enjoyed his insistence on a
dialogue-based interview. I was constantly pushed to give him my thoughts as
well as listen to his remarks.

As the meeting progressed, I thought it would be safe to reopen the
religion question, since now he seemed reassured that I had no intentions of
commandeering the score for Christ. I conceded that the Dies Irae’s religious
history was definitely not part of Sondheim’s reasoning when creating the
score; he had not read Aquinas and never even heard of Anselm. However, I
told him that my investigations in the past months had noticed that a
theological framework could be extrapolated from the show. To this he replied,
“Look, I don’t understand why you are looking for this thing in the first place.
I didn’t put it there, so it isn’t there.”¹⁸⁶ I grew frustrated that he wouldn’t

¹⁸⁵ Stephen Sondheim, in conversation with the composer, August 24, 2010.
¹⁸⁶ Sondheim, Conversation, August 2010.
concede the point, citing the organ plaque from the 1979 Broadway production (that one that claims “The Blood of Jesus Christ His Son Cleanseth us from all Sins”). He responded by saying, “I don’t know where you got that information from, but there was no organ in Hal [Prince’s] version, never mind any plaque.” 187 I was mortified that I had mixed up my facts or found faulty information. At the time, I had only read set descriptions and it wasn’t until later in the week that I was able to view the video recording at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The video confirmed my account: the organ was there, and so was the plaque. Was Sondheim trying not to see what I saw? Moreover, how are we to understand Sondheim’s vehement assertions that appear to negate nearly everything discussed in the previous four chapters?

Sondheim insists that because he did not intend a religious interpretation, such a reading is pointless. However, just because the intent was not there, does not mean the show does not lend itself to this sort of reading. Artistic intentions often have little or no bearing on the way a work of art is interpreted. In fact, this situation occurred during early rehearsals for the original production of Sweeney Todd. Craig Zadan explains that “When Sondheim brought the idea of the show to [director] Harold Prince, Prince was bewildered and rather uninterested.” 188 According to Prince, “I couldn’t find

187 Sondheim, Conversation, August 2010.
188 Zadan, Sondheim & Company. 245.
what the motor of the show would be.”189 For some months, the duo debated what the show was about. Sondheim was attracted mainly to the melodrama, but Prince refused to direct unless he could find a deeper meaning in the story. It was not until Prince realized the show was about vengeance that he knew he could do it. “And then came the factory, and the class struggle, the terrible struggle to move out of the class in which you’re born, and suddenly it became about the Industrial Age… that was very important. It made it possible for me to conceive it.”190

When I asked Sondheim about his views on the original production and its focus on machinery and industrialism, his reaction was tepid. “I didn’t think of that. That was all Hal’s doing.”191 Sondheim’s main interests in the story were obsession and melodrama, Prince’s was the industrial revolution and the class struggle. Referring to rehearsals for the 1979 production, Prince says “I suppose people who are collaborating should be after the same thing, but Steve and I were obviously not with respect to Sweeney.”192 Even though the industrial age was a palpable backdrop for Sondheim’s story, he had never found it to be a central theme or a lens through which one could find deeper meanings in Sweeney Todd… until Prince expanded upon it.

Perhaps the most puzzling and striking comment I heard during my meeting with Sondheim had nothing to do with my religious approach to the

189 Zadan, Sondheim & Company, 245.
190 Zadan, Sondheim & Company, 245.
191 Sondheim, Conversation, August 2010.
material. When I told him I intended to devote my undergraduate thesis solely to the study of *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim was surprised. Not because the effort was ambitious, but quite the opposite. In his mind, there wasn’t enough to write about. *Sweeney Todd* was a cheap thriller, he said, comparing my efforts to “writing a thesis on *Hamlet.*” How are we to take this very paradoxical statement? On the one hand, he asserted that *Sweeney Todd* was not even worth the attention of a whole thesis. And yet, he made the point by comparing the musical to *Hamlet*, a play which has certainly been the subject of numerous theses and dissertations. I have since speculated whether he said some or all of this in jest because, in spite of this confusing message as well as his denial of my ideas, Sondheim was not entirely unsupportive. As I departed from his home he told me that “you clearly knew what you are talking about and whatever you write will be great.”

At the start of my research, I was especially interested in what Sondheim had intended for the show. I believe the composer when he says that he “had no religious intentions whatsoever in utilizing the *Dies Irae* in *Sweeney Todd.*” But *Sweeney Todd* is not meant to promote only the composer’s ideas. It is a concept musical, and if a theological framework can be demonstrated by means of the libretto and score, then the interpretation does not require the composer’s validation. The effort, I hope, validates itself.

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193 Sondheim, Conversation, August 2010.
194 Christopher Ceccolini, email to Dr. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, August 25, 2010.
Appendix

Fig. 1

Dies Irae, dies illa, Day of wrath, that day
Solvet saeculum in favilla Will dissolve the earth into ashes
Teste David cum Sibilla. As David and the Sibyl testify.

Quantus tremor est futurus What dread there will be
Quando judex est venturus When the Judge shall come
Cunta stricte discussurus. To judge all things strictly.

Tuba mirum spargens sonum The trumpet shall spread a wondrous sound
Per sepulcra regionum Through every grave, in all lands,
Coget omnes ante thronum. It will drive mankind before the throne.

Mors stupebit et natura Death and nature shall be astonished
Cum resurget creatura When all creation rises again
Judicanti responsura. To answer to the Judge.

Liber scriptus proferetur A book, written in, will be brought forth
In quo totum continetur, In which is contained everything that is
Unde mundus judicetur. Out of which the world shall be judged.

Judex ergo cum sedebit When the Judge is seated
Quidquid latet apparebit, Whatever is hidden will reveal itself.
Nil inultum remanebit. Nothing will remain unavenged.

Quid sum miser tunc dicturus, What then shall I say, wretch that I am,
Quem patronem rogarthus, What advocate is there to speak for me,
Cum vix Justus sit secures? When even the righteous are not secure?

Rex tremendae majestatis, King of awful majesty,
Qui salvandos salvas gratis, Who freely saves the redeemed,
Salve me, fons pietatis. Save me, O fount of goodness.

Recordare, Jesu pie Remember, blessed Jesus,
Quod sum causa tuae viae, That I am the cause of Thy pilgrimage,
Ne me perdas illa die. Do not forsake me on that day.

Quaerens me sedistis lassus, Seeking me, Thou sat down weary,
Redemisti crucem passus, Thou didst redeem me, suffering on the Cross.
Tantus labor non sit cassus. Let not such toil be in vain.

Juste judex ultionis Just and avenging Judge,
Donum fac remissionis Grant pardon
Ante diem rationis. Before the day of reckoning.

Ingemisco tamquam reus, I groan like a guilty man.
Culpa rubet vultus meus, Guilt reddens my face.
Supplicanti parce, Deus. Spare a suppliant, O God.

Qui Mariam absolvesti Who didst absolve Mary Magdalene
Et latronem exaudisti, And who didst hearken to the thief,
Mihi quoque spem dedisti. To me also hast Thou given hope.

Preces meae non sunt dignae, My prayers are not worthy,
Sed tu bonus fac benigne, But Thou in Thy mercy, grant
Ne perenni cremerigne. That I burn not in everlasting fire.

Inter oves locum praesta, Place me among the sheep
Et ad haedis me sequestra, And separate me from the goats,
Statuens in parte dextra. Setting me on Thy right hand.

Confustatis maledictis Once the cursed have been rebuked,
Flammis acribus addictis, Sentenced to acrid flames,
Voca me cum benedictus. Call me with the blessed.

Oro suppless et acclinis, I pray in supplication on my knees.
Cor contritum quasi cinis, My heart contrite as the dust,
Gere curam mei finis. Safeguard my fate.

Lacrimosa dies illa Mournful that day
Qua resurget ex favilla When, from the dust shall rise
Judicandus homo reus. Guilty man to be judged.
Huic ergo parce, Deus. Therefore spare him, O God.
Pie Jesu, Domine, Merciful Jesus, Lord
Dona eis requiem. Grant them rest.
Fig. 3

A Beggar Woman appears.

BEGGAR WOMAN:

Alms... alms... for a miserable woman.

Fig. 4

Toby

never be the same To me. Maria!

Fig. 5

a tempo

Lucy lies in ashes

a tempo

cresc. poco a poco al fine
Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8
Fig. 11

Swing your razor wide,

Swing your razor wide,

Swing your razor wide,

Swing your razor wide,

ff subito

L. L.
Fig. 12

What happened then... well, that's the play, And

he wouldn't want us to give it away,
Fig. 13

TODD: Piu sforzato

These are my friends. See how they glisten.

Fig. 14

COMPANY: (Appearing suddenly) Todd exits slowly, holding the razor high.

Lift your razor high, Sweeney.
Fig. 15

(WOMEN)

Swee

(TENORS)

Let ting it lead to high er places. Swee

(BASSIS & BASSIS)

Set it like a ma chine, a sort of a scene 's did, Did

Fig. 16

Meno mosso \( (j = 120) \)

They

\( \text{poco d'un} \)

all de serve to die! Tell you
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