

How does Tim Burtons *Sweeney Todd* (2007) depict obsession that is caused by loss? How does the films score support the underlying themes of the film?

An adaptation of the 1979 stage musical by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is a 2007 film directed by Tim Burton, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Starring Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter. Upon hearing the early drafts of the songs, Judy Prince remarked "Oh God, I didn't know this was what [Sweeney Todd] was about. It's nothing to do with Grand Guignol. It's the story of your life." An article in *The Guardian* on the original musical states, on this note, "This may seem a strange remark to make about a show dealing with a crazed Victorian serial killer. But Prince hit, I suspect, on a profound truth: above all, this is a work about destructive obsession and seems to spring from some dark, expressive need in Sondheim himself." (Billington, M. 2003)

Many of the overt themes in this film have to do with grief, family, and revenge. But one of the most key, underlying themes that accompanies these is the idea of *obsession*, the way it influences a persons way of thinking and perception on life. *Sweeney Todd* is a film about the obsessed, from Sweeney Todd and his desire to get revenge, to Judge Turpin and his lust for Johanna, down to Mrs Lovett, and her candid love for Sweeney Todd. The target of ones obsessions drives a majority of the actions and choices of the characters in this film.

When discussing the music of *Sweeney Todd*, the two most important motifs present in the soundtrack are the Dies irae and what is officially-unofficially referred to as Sweeney Todds theme.

The Dies irae is a Gregorian chant dating back to the 13th Century, often used by composers to represent death. It is present throughout the entirety of the soundtrack to *Sweeney Todd*, though it rarely appears in its entirety, instead the first four notes serving as the basis for a majority of the score in order to imbue the soundtrack with the sound of *death*, a core idea throughout *Sweeney Todd*.

Sweeney Todds theme, is a leitmotif that appears consistently throughout many, many songs in this films score.

In this essay, I will focus on the lead, Sweeney Todd, and exploring his obsessions, the past, the future and the present, and how these obsessions shape his character and dictate his actions through the film.

A BARBER AND HIS WIFE

At the beginning of the film, Sweeney Todd is arriving back in London after an extended absence. As Todd steps off the boat, he sings briefly about his past – A barber, and his wife.

The first thing of note is that this scene is notably more saturated and colourful than the dark hues and harsh lighting present throughout the rest of the film. This scene is warm and bright, as it's a fond memory for Todd. He calls the barber - himself – foolish and naïve, and perhaps to him, this vision of London is as foolish as he was, a false idealisation. But it's such a stark contrast to the rest of the film that it's clear that Sweeney Todd holds his memories of this time close to him. This is the scene where we are introduced to Sweeney Todds *obsession*.

One of this films strongest, and most important elements is its use of costume design. In this scene, Lucy and her daughter, Johanna are clothed entirely in white, lacy gowns. Lucys white bonnet,

paired with the soft overhead lighting makes her appear angelic, as if she is glowing, and draws the audiences eye mainly towards her.

This represents Todds idealisation of his wife and daughter, and we can see that he considers them as pure and kind, almost ethereal. In contrast, Todd – or, Benjamin Barker himself is clothed in dark tones, blacks and browns, perhaps signalling that he considers himself not as “pure” as his family, his perception of himself is tainted.

When Judge Turpin enters the scene, he is cloaked in shadow, the once soft lighting now harsh and backlit. He wears a coat of red with his lapel subtly curved upwards, harkening imagery of horns. If Todd sees Lucy as an angel, then to him, Judge Turpin is the devil.

Each time Todd sings the word, “..beautiful” we hear a low, three (to four, as the song continues) low notes. These notes are either derived or taken straight from the first few notes of the Dies irae. Lucy is presumed dead throughout the film, and these notes could signify that Todd feels she is dead, or perhaps lost to him now. This song – always used in relation to death, is now being used for a slightly different context, one of mourning.

Outside of the score, this scene sprinkles quiet, diegetic noises throughout in accordance to the scene playing out. These sounds are non-intrusive until Benjamin Barker is accosted by the police, we hear the sound of him being knocked over the head clearly, almost interrupting the music, and the soundtrack crescendos accordingly in order to create a more emotional and distressing effect on the viewer.

So, this scene sets up Sweeney Todds backstory and his *obsession*, the loss of his prior life and his family, and revenge he desires against the Judge Turpin. As well as the two key motifs we will hear throughout the film.

EPIPHANY

Having gained, and then lost his opportunity to kill Judge Turpin, Sweeney Todd fully embraces his obsession, his desire to kill. And resolves to murdering the people of London until he can reach judge Turpin again.

This scene is nearly entirely shot on handheld, transitioning to smoother camera motions towards the end of the musical number. This represents Todds unstable nature and franticness in this moment, as if his mind is racing. Later in the number, Todd stands in a crowded London street, holding his arms out with his razors in both hands, as the camera zooms out smoothly, this change in camera motion signifies Todds change in demeanour and growth in confidence.

This is the first of two shots in close proximity that use this same zoom out, tilt down camera motion. This repetition represents Todds scattered mindset, as he goes quickly from feeling confident, to murderous, to mourning the loss of his wife and child in a moments notice, before finally settling on his confident nature. As the camera zooms out on Todd on his knees, we see that, unlike the previous scene, he is alone in the street. This represents that Todd believes that he is alone in his plight.

He stands in front of a church as he sings about Lucy, whom he believes dead. This signifies the state that we, the audience and the characters believe Lucy to be in at this point. And furthers Lucys connection to the holy, at least in Todds eyes. While death is present throughout Sweeney Todd, this is the only time we see a church prominently featured in the film, signifying the importance of Lucys death to us, Sweeney Todd idolises her image and holds her up, in his mind as something

holy.

As Sweeney Todd sings the line “..Not for long”, we hear the most complete version of the Dies irae played on the violas. Through this we can tell that he has fully, finally resolved himself to killing others in this exact moment. The instruments in the beginning portion of this song are a mix of frantic strings and low, heavy and oppressive brass instruments. Sweeney Todds theme can be heard throughout on the strings, and we as the audience can tell, even without the lyrics and prior context, that Todd feels unstable, his madness crescendoing to a point and dictating his actions from now on.

This is the point where Sweeney Todds obsession reaches its peak, having had a taste for blood after just killing Adolfo Pirelli and losing his opportunity to kill the judge. As well as an opportunity to see his daughter, Johanna again coming to light before being ripped away from him. Sweeney Todd can feel the revenge in his grasp. And by the end of the song, he has fully committed himself to his goal, he has a new obsession – death.

BY THE SEA

In this scene, Mrs Lovett is imagining her future with Sweeney Todd, and expressing her desire to live by the sea. This scene is a sudden change of pace from the scenes preceding it, this scene acts as both a break for the characters and for the audience, a calm before the storm, if you will.

This song opens with an example of Mickey Mousing – a technique where action is synced to the accompanying music. Each time Mrs Lovett kisses Todd on the cheek, an accompanying chime plays. This makes the scene feel more fantastical and “happy” comparatively.

In contrast to A Barber and His Wife, this is a vision of the future, a daydream of Mrs Lovetts invention. Much like the aforementioned scene, this scene is relatively more saturated and colourful in nature, featuring vibrant blues, reds, yellows and whites throughout. Mrs Lovetts wardrobe is colourful and playful feeling, decked out in deep blues and bright reds, these reds signifying the part she plays in Todds crimes. In contrast, Sweeney Todd is dressed entirely in blacks and whites. Sporting a horizontal striped black and white swimsuit as they sit together on the beach, this could reference Todds current status as a “criminal” and previous arrest at the hands of Judge Turpin.

The lack of colour in Todds wardrobe compared to Mrs Lovetts primary colours also represents the difference in their mindsets, Todd is thinking only in black and white – goods and evils. He is so focused on the once good in his life, Lucy and his daughter Johanna, and the evils prevailing the world, the likes of Judge Turpin and the injustice in the world that it seeps through, colouring him even into the fantasy world of Mrs Lovetts imagination.

Despite the cheery atmosphere and idealisation of this daydream, Sweeney Todd is barely responsive to Mrs Lovetts imagination and discussion of the future, only responding when he must in order to please her, and seeming stiff and awkward during the rest of the number. He holds his head low and his shoulders stiff, his eyes distant and brows furrowed. He often peers awkwardly at Mrs Lovett, as if finding her strange, we can tell Todd doesn't completely love her, and likely never will. Todds obsession with the past is causing him to lose sight of what his life could be, the future. In a twisted way, he has accrued a family of sorts in Mrs Lovett and the young boy Toby, and has a successful business together with Mrs Lovett, but Todd is so focused on avenging what happened to him and his family in the past that he cannot even imagine himself fitting into a hypothetical future. And despite her fantasy, neither can Mrs Lovett.

Todds obsession is consuming him so much that he acts more like a walking corpse than a human being, not being able to fit into the vibrant imaginations of Mrs Lovett, his perception on the world

and what has happened to him in the past has tainted him so much that outside of the depths and grime of London he sticks out like a sore thumb. He can hardly imagine himself living a life outside of his current one, perhaps this is an early indication of the end.

EXAMPLE FOUR: THE END

In this scene, the culmination of everything that has happened so far, Sweeney Todd has just unknowingly murdered his wife, and (knowingly) murdered Judge Turpin. As Mrs Lovett opens the door to the oven, Todd sees the beggar woman's face - whom he just killed – clearly for the first time in the film, and realises what he has just done.

Lucy is clad entirely in black in this scene, an inversion of the pure white she wears in the flashbacks and Todd's memory, truly signifying her death in this scene. Though similarly to Todd's memories, she is bathed in warm, orange-yellow light when he sees her face, sparking recognition in him.

As Todd and Mrs Lovett begin to sing, they both stare at their loved ones, Todd at Lucy, and Mrs Lovett at Todd, Mrs Lovett sings to Todd, trying to justify her lies to him and proclaiming that she loves him, though she stares at him with fear in her eyes, moving slowly towards him as if trying not to provoke him. And when Todd turns to her suddenly, she backs away in fear, uncertain of his change of demeanour.

The music used in the ending is a mixture of various songs we have heard previously in the film, Mrs Lovett singing "Poor Thing" (Previously used to explain what happened to Lucy in the film, this verse acts as an extension of the previous verses) Todd sings (song) and then, when trying to appease Mrs Lovett, he starts to sing "A Little Priest", Mrs Lovett intersperses this song with a faster, frantic version of "By The Sea", though this song is suddenly cut off by Todd throwing Mrs Lovett into the furnace and her screams of agony as she burns. Todd soon begins another rendition of "A Barber and His Wife", singing to himself as he mourns Lucy's death. The use of all of these songs is frantic and sudden but feels natural, used to give the ending an uneasy and frantic feeling.

As Todd sings, we see Toby crawl out of the sewers, previously having hidden in there to escape Todd and Mrs Lovett, and grab Todd's razor off the ground. Sweeney Todd tilts his head upwards, exposing his neck, before he sings about his naiveté, and Toby slits his throat, as Todd had done to others so many times before.

In an interview, Tim Burton states, regarding Todd: "The only thing that's keeping him going is one single minded thing which is tragic. You don't see anything else around him." (Rob Carnevale, 2007) And at this point, Todd has lost the only thing driving him forward, his *obsession*, after realising she had been in his grasp the entire time, and for him to be the one to cause her demise. It's unclear if Sweeney Todd realised his death was coming at the end, but as he bleeds out from his neck, we see him barely react, allowing himself to slump over Lucy and pass away quietly.

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