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Going Down the Drain: Sweeney Todd, Sewerage, and London Sanitation in the 1840s.

ABSTRACT
This article examines the penny blood *The String of Pearls* in terms of its treatment of human remains as the equivalent of human excrement. In the mid-nineteenth century, London underwent a transformation in terms of its waste and sanitation management, involving changes which were often controversial and generated considerable debate and discussion in all areas of society. Many of these changes had a disproportionate affect on the urban poor who were also the main readers of the penny bloods and dreadfuls, so it is no surprise to find that sanitation is a major topic in these fictions. The article argues that the Sweeney Todd serial acts as an intervention into these discussions.
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You never quite knew what you were going to find waiting for you if you descended below ground in Victorian London. There are multiple reports of all manner of weird, wonderful and frankly repulsive discoveries made by the men employed to keep the drainage and sewerage systems going. In 1862, the *Builder* magazine, covering the construction of the new main drain for the city, complained that 'the filth which, under the veiled term of sewage' flowed below the surface of the earth included an assortment of distasteful substances:

> the percolations of crammed churchyards, the rain-washings of the streets, alleys, and yards…horse and cattle dungs, sweepings and scrapings lying on [street surfaces]; refuse from hospitals, infirmaries and dispensaries; fishmongers' and fishmarket washings and offal; slaughterhouse offal; fell-mongers', glue-makers', candle-makers', bone-dealers', tanners', knackers', scum boilers', and triple-dressers' liquid refuse; decayed leaves and vegetables; paper and rags; refuse from chemical works, gas works and dye works; … dead rats, dead dogs and cats, and sad to say, dead babes. People sicken and die too soon (Anonymous, 1862, p. 53).

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As this report makes clear, decomposing human remains circulated freely with excrement, dead animals and animal parts, and the detritus of urban life. Unsurprisingly, the greatest contemporary historian of London, Peter Ackroyd, describes its sewer system as a place 'of universal defilement' and 'the token of death' (Ackroyd, 2012, p. 65).

However, even for a veteran of London's underground networks, what was stumbled upon in the vaults of a Baptist chapel in 1839, was extraordinary. Charged by the Commissioners of Sewers with constructing a new drain under Enon Chapel, in Clement's Lane, a trip underground was required by the workers. Given the reputation the place had acquired by then, they must have been expecting the worst. Nevertheless, while the chapel was certainly notorious as the apparent source of an appalling stink that permeated the entire neighbourhood, and a breeding ground for swarms of what local children called 'body bugs', black, flying insects that hovered any days when the weather was slightly warm, no one was quite prepared for what was discovered in the subterranean darkness.

Enon Chapel was established in 1822 by the Reverend W. Howse, with the upper level devoted to the worship of God, and the lower chamber to burial of deceased congregants. Given the relatively cramped space beneath the building, the number of corpses that could be safely interred there was limited, but Howse was nothing if not an enterprising minister of the Almighty. The chapel had not long been in operation before congregants and local residents began complaining about the horrible smell that wafted from under the floorboards, and worshippers had to resort to pressing vinegar-soaked handkerchiefs to their noses to get through services. The poor Sunday school children, whose lessons took place within the chapel, were the ones who pointed out the insect infestation. The fact that the chapel was actually built over what was rumoured to be an open sewer could have rationally explained these phenomena. After all, it was not as if nineteenth century Londoners were unfamiliar with unpleasant odours. Indeed, according to one historian of the city, Victorian London was, from one perspective, simply a vast accumulation of pungent aromas: 'think of the worst smell you have ever met', Liza Picard advises. 'Now imagine what it was like to have that in your nostrils all day and all night, all over London' (Pickard, 2005, p. 1). This repellent potpourri was caused by the collision of a massive increase in population with a sanitation infrastructure completely incapable of dealing with the extraordinary growth in excrement, dead bodies, and the multitude of other waste products that comes with metropolitan life. Given that the city already reeked to high heaven, that the residents of Clement's Lane even noticed the abominable smell coming from Enon Chapel, indicates just how abhorrent it must have been.

The stink was not, however, generated just by an open drain, though there *was* one running into the burial chamber. The sewage men discovered that the vaults of Enon Chapel had, in effect, been turned into a mass grave, and there

were bodies everywhere, piled floor to ceiling, in various states of decomposition and disintegration. Burial in Enon Chapel was, relatively speaking, a bargain – certainly by comparison with its nearest competition, St. Clement Dane's. That these bodies were not lovingly interred but rather simply thrown into an ever-growing pile and left to rot, accounted for the lack of expense, and a space that was supposed to house a few hundred apparently contained upwards of 12,000 cadavers. One knowledgeable local interviewed later helped to dispel the 'mystification' about just how on earth so many carcases could be squeezed into so small a space, insisting that he had 'no doubt whatever that bodies were slipped down the sewer', to make a bit more room for new residents (Walker, 1846). In an admirable display of efficiency, the Reverend Howse had essentially combined two methods of waste disposal in the cellars of his chapel, effectively converting human remains into human waste.[1]

The coterminous presence of an open drain, leading to a sewer, and a mass grave makes the Enon scandal particularly resonant, given the intense debate about sanitation that took place in 1840's and 1850's London. In this debate the overcrowding of graveyards and church vaults was treated as part of the same problem as the management of human and animal excrement. There was another sanitation problem considered in need of immediate action by the commissars of Victorian health, though this problem threatened the mind rather than the body – the burgeoning penny press industry which churned out enormous quantities of literary drek. What we would now call 'pulp fiction' was treated as an urban pollutant by guardians of public morality deeply concerned about what it was doing to the minds of its readers. The growth in literacy and consumption of popular fiction generated a high level of anxiety about the potentially injurious affect it could have on public morality, especially the morality of the working class (Brantlinger, 1998, pp. 69-92). Unfortunately, this group of readers were not perusing 'improving' material, but chose instead to consume the supposedly morally degrading, publications such as the *Terrific Register* (1825) (a collection of gruesome stories of 'true crimes'), the *Newgate Calendar* (eighteenth century criminal biographies), the 'Newgate novels' (like *Rookwood* (1834), and *Jack Sheppard* (1839) by William Harrison Ainsworth which had criminal protagonists and which were accused of glamorising crime),

[1] The most important contemporary account of Enon is Walker (1839, pp. 154-158). See also Arnold (2006, pp. 104-107). It is important to note that not everyone accepted Walker's claims, or those of his witnesses. John Snow, gave a rather less Gothic account of the same place, insisting that, not only was it impossible for anyone to have fitted 12,000 corpses into the vaults of the chapel, but that it simply didn't happen. He subjected the Enon controversy, and particularly Walker's handling of it, to a coruscating and (to my mind rather persuasive) sceptical examination. He accuses Walker of being purposely gullible, and content to damage the reputation of the deceased Reverend Howse to make political capital for his sanitation causes (Snow, 1843, pp. 47-57).

and, most significantly, the ubiquitous Penny Bloods. Penny Bloods were cheap serials sold primarily to an audience locked out of the novel market because of price, were mostly historical and criminal in subject, and focused on gory and macabre episodes. Given that it was treated almost as a piece of Gothic theatre, it is unsurprising that the Enon Chapel outrage can be considered a major source of imagery for perhaps the most important penny blood of them all (For more on the penny bloods and penny dreadfuls, see James, 1963; Haining, 1975; Anglo, 1977; James & Smith 1998; Springhall, 1998; Killeen, 2012).

In *The String of Pearls* (1846-1847), now best known as the origin story of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, the church of St. Dunstan's-in-the-East, merely a ten-minute walk away from Enon Chapel, becomes the centre of an scandal. Congregants complain about an overpowering stench they have to endure when attending services, and the Bishop of London, there to perform a number of confirmations, runs out of the church vowing never to return until the stink is vanquished. So appalled is he by the unendurable smell that 'the people found themselves confirmed before they almost knew where they were' (*SP*, p.154), and if the bishop 'could decently have taken his departure without confirming anybody at all, there is no doubt but that he would have willingly done so, and left all the congregation to die and be – something or other' (*SP*, p. 153).[2] After this embarrassing incident, the St. Dunstan fetor cannot be left to grow ever more rancid. During the ensuing investigation, the prominent magistrate Sir Richard Blunt enters the vaults, but immediately retreats, having located the cause of the foul odour, the 'horrible secret … as will never be forgotten in connection with old St. Dunstan's church' (*SP*, p. 250). Sir Richard has discovered that, like Enon Chapel, St. Dunstan's contains a mass grave full of festering human bodies. As Sweeney Todd scholar Robert Mack points out, 'the representation of overcrowded graveyards and cemeteries that emit a repulsive smell' in *String* would undoubtedly have 'stood out' to original readers, as a powerful reminder of the Enon horror (Mack, 2007, p. 181), and the contribution of a widespread concern about post-mortem burial to the writing and reading of penny bloods has also been examined by other Victorian pulp fiction specialists (cf. Hackenberg, 2009; Powell, 2004). As I have pointed out, however, the Enon Chapel affair was notable partly because of the ways in which it acted as a microcosm of sanitation problems more generally, not just difficulties in the disposal of human remains, but also the treatment of excrement and the working of a proper waste system. Enon's corpse-stuffed sewer was as important as its cadaver-piled vaults, as it echoed the discursive connection sanitary campaigners of the 1830s and 1840s

[2] I will use the edition of *String of Pearls* edited by Robert Mack, and published in 2007. This edition 'follows precisely that of the original 1846-1847 text' (*SP*, p. xxx). Page references will be provided in parenthesis in the main text.

made between human remains and urban waste. This article suggests that as a (the?) prominent example of Victorian pulp fiction, *The String of Pearls* not only references notorious scandals of the period like Enon Chapel, but participates and intervenes in the discourse of sanitation that so captured the imaginations of the Victorian public, a discourse that took in not just the disposal of corpses, but also the management of excrement and slum life, all issues which were of enormous importance to the primary readers of this penny blood: the urban poor.

It is useful to begin this discussion with the Enon Chapel scandal, because it served as a prime example of bad sanitary practice for campaigners who wanted to restructure radically the city's hygiene systems. No sooner was the chapel exposed as a veritable Gothic castle in 1833, than it was snapped up as an establishment for entertainment, and soon after pleasure seekers were literally dancing on the bones of their former neighbours and friends when it was converted into a dancing hall for a society of teetotallers. In exasperation, the surgeon and sanitation champion George Walker, whose *Gatherings from Graveyards* (1839) made much of Enon as an edifying example of how urban burial should not be conducted, intervened, disgusted by the apparent indifference of the dancers to the continued presence of human remains in the vaults. He purchased the chapel, had the cellar excavated and all the remains removed for formal burial in Norwood cemetery in 1847, all with as much publicity as possible, reminding London's readers of its horrors just as huge numbers of them were reading about St. Dunstan's, another house of worship chock full of dismembered limbs and skeletons in *String* (for this 'sequel' to the original horror, cf. Jackson, 2014, pp. 124-126). Walker, a veteran campaigner against the venerable practice of burial in urban church graveyards and vaults, weaponised the Enon affair in pamphlets, private investigations and newspaper articles to convince the authorities that not only did allegedly 'miasmic' overcrowded graveyards threaten the health of local populations, but that they were a threat to human decency as well. Enon Chapel was his most prominent example of how disrespectfully treated human remains were in a city which simply had no more room to house the dead.

For the average reader of *String*, however, the refined disgust expressed about foetid decomposition and the 'respectful' treatment of the deceased advocated by campaigners like Walker, probably sounded rather hollow given the actual living conditions endured by inhabitants of the slums. The narrator of *String* sneers at those overly concerned with urban 'stinkifications', but only when they can be smelt by respectable attendees of religious institutions, remarking of the ignominious reputation of St. Dunstan's that 'a nuisance of any description' in London must become 'venerable by age before anyone thinks of removing it' (*SP*, p. 150):

> Probably, if this frightful stench, being suggestive, as it was, of all sorts of horrors, had been graciously pleased to confine itself to some poor locality, nothing would have been

> heard of it; but when it became actually offensive to a gentleman in a metropolitan pulpit, and when it began to make itself perceptible to the sleepy faculties of the churchwardens of St. Dunstan's church, in Fleet Street, so as to prevent them even from dozing through the afternoon sermon, it became a very serious matter indeed (*SP*, pp. 150-151).

Here the narrator places himself squarely with the inhabitants of the 'poor localities', and against the 'gentlemen' and 'churchwardens', and perhaps against attendees of churches altogether, who are unconcerned with the nauseous odours which assail the noses of the poor every day, until one of them finally begins to waft in their direction and disturbs their slumber time in the pews.

The narrator's emphasis on the social and cultural (though not the geographical) distance between those who live in these poor districts and the congregants of St. Dunstan's possibly reflects the fact that, in this period, the poor were known to be the least likely to attend any church service in the city. As the cultural historian Roy Porter notes, 'religion had no hold upon London's masses', citing one cleric's view that Eastenders considered religion the preserve of a 'different' class (Porter, 2000, p. 363), a comment echoed in *String*, when one character remarks that he doesn't have a soul because it is a luxury he can't afford (*SP*, p. 74). The narrator was not the only one to notice that, unless directly confronted with the horrific living conditions which their neighbours endured, influential inhabitants of London tended to simply dismiss this the issue as none of their concern. In one report, London's Medical Officer of Health, John Simon, warned about the depths of degradation in which many of the city's residents lived, asking the 'educated man' to 'devote an hour to visiting some very poor area in the metropolis'. For Simon, an act of sympathetic imagination was required for the cultured to understand life in the slums, and the accumulation of dirt, filth and putridity those who lived there experienced: 'Let him fancy what it would be to himself to live there, in that beastly degradation of stink, fed with such bread, drinking such water…Let him talk to the inmates, let him hear what is thought of the bone-boiler next door, or the slaughter-house behind; what of the sewer-grating before the door…what of the artisan's dead body, stretched on his widow's one bed, beside her living children' (cf. Porter, 2000, p. 318). Both *String*'s narrator and Simon confront the widespread belief that the filth of these areas was caused by the fact that they were populated by filthy people. Actual dirt, matter out of place, was considered indicative of naturally (perhaps even biologically) dirty human beings and the two organically belonged together. In 1840, when asked by James Peeke, the Surveyor of the Towns Hamlets Division of the Commissioners of Sewers, 'are not the sewers very beneficial in promoting the cleanliness of the neighbourhood?', one witness responded: 'the people are most intolerably filthy; they are the lowest description of Irish, many Germans, and many Jews, and they are, of all the people in the world, the most filthy' (*The Sessonal Papers,* 1840, p. 123).

It is, of course, true that London's slums were almost indescribably filthy. Many of them overflowed with excrement from private cesspools and blocked sewer pipes, as well as blood from neighbouring slaughter houses (White, 2007, p. 33). The area around St. Giles's Church was considered notoriously filthy, described by the architect Sidney Smirke in 1834 as composed of 'unutterable abominations', and as 'a retreat of wretchedness, the nest of disease, and at once the nursery and sanctuary of vice' (cf. Knight, 1841, pp. 254-255; for an analysis cf. White, 2007, pp. 29-35). However, rather than seeing this accumulation of dirt as a function of poverty, many of those deeply involved in reforming the city often resorted to pathological rather than social explanation. Mary Poovey describes the various reports of the tireless sanitation crusader Edwin Chadwick as, in part, attempts to establish the '"naturalness" of middle-class living habits', against which the habits of the poor could be judged not just deficient but indicative of their perverted preference for dirt itself (Poovey, 1995, p. 117; cf. also Danahay, 1991). Only when the stink of poverty literally made its presence felt in the more salubrious haunts of the city was something actually done about it.

The careful demarcation of the city into clean and dirty zones, and its inhabitants into the clean and unclean, is broken down in *String*, and not just by sharp critiques of the presumptuous attitudes of the well-to-do. Rather than being generated by the poor or immigrant communities, the ultimate origin of all the waste matter under St. Dunstan's Church is Sweeney Todd's apparently respectable barbershop in Fleet Street. Todd's may have had a respectable enough façade, but its basement engenders the putrescent waste that is stinking up St. Dunstan's. Todd, for those readers who live on another planet, is a barber who cuts more than just hair. The plot of *String* concerns his routine robbery and murder of his customers, after which he butchers their bodies and then passes the meat on to his 'friend' Mrs. Lovett, who uses human body parts as fillings for her very popular pies which she sells in a shop located in Bell Yard. Todd deposits any excess, unusable body parts and bones in the connecting vaults of St. Dunstan's Church. The cellars of Mrs. Lovett's shop in fact seem to be linked to the whole of underground London – it is the centre of a vast web of corridors and passage: 'there were as many doors in different directions, and singular low-arched entrances to different vaults…that one might almost suppose the inhabitants of all the surrounding neighbourhood had … given up their cellars to Lovett's pie factory' (*SP*, p. 93). Underneath these superficially reputable establishments, then, shops and churches frequented by the wealthy and the respectable, is a veritable labyrinth of filth, analogous to the underground sewer system which Ackroyd terms London's 'heart of darkness' (Ackroyd, 2012, p. 65).

It is possible that the anonymous author located these nefarious activities in Fleet Street, because of its long association with the sewer system. The Fleet River (which runs past the eastern end of Fleet Street) was synonymous with

sewerage transportation. The lower sections of the river had been bricked over and converted into sewers in the 1730s, and it was notorious since that period for being 'full of dung and dead things', a veritable 'river of death' (Ackroyd, 2000, p. 556). Indeed, in 1846, the same year as *String* was first published, one of the Fleet sewers literally exploded because of the build-up of trapped gas, spurting excrement onto the surrounding streets and flattening three posthouses (Ackroyd, 2000, p. 557).

The corpses of Todd's victims, then, are transported underground through filthy tunnels and caverns, just as the Enon corpses flowed through the sewer system, joined by all the other waste of the city. The London sewers were not, of course, originally designed to carry excrement at all. Their purpose was simply to collect rainwater deposited by street drains, and carry that water to the Thames for rerouting into the city's water system. However, by the 1820s, the sewers had become conduits of human excrement because of the ingenious invention of the water closet (WC). Until the introduction of the humble water closet, human waste in London was (badly) managed through a network of independent cesspools. The privies of a house were connected by drains to a cesspool, sometimes located in the back yard, but more often (for obvious reasons of gravity) in the cellar. While the houses of affluent Londoners accommodated many privies and indeed many cesspools, in less respectable areas of the city, several houses and tenements were often connected to just one cesspool. These over 200,000 cesspools were usually bricked in but permeable so that liquid waste could seep out into the surrounding earth. They were emptied in the hours of darkness by night soil men, who would enter the cellar after midnight, gamely climb into a usually full, and often overflowing pool, and shovel out the excrement, transporting the excavated waste matter on a cart driven to a relatively close-by manure heap, where it would sit – often for weeks and months at a time (for a superb analysis of the waste management of London, cf. Jackson, 2014, pp. 46-68; also Halliday, 1999).

To say that the cesspool cleaning was a rather sporadic and unreliable system would be an understatement, and many of them could go without being emptied for months at a time. Judith Flanders describes the cesspools of densely populated areas as simply 'beyond imagining' (Flanders, 2013, p. 206). London effectively sat on a barely contained gloopy 'lake' of excrement (Ackroyd, 2014, p. 68), always threatening to overflow (and quite often actually doing so), seeping into the cellars and foundations of houses, causing many of them to turn into what were to all intents and purposes faecal swamps. For all the sanitation rhetoric about the difference between the living conditions of the middle class and the poor, everyone, in fact, lived on top of piss and shit, and most cellars were sites of horror for much of the year. The foundations of many houses – including the houses of the very rich – were, as the first report of the Metropolitan Sanitary Commission put it in 1847, 'literally honeycombed' with cesspool chambers, and the constant leakage

threatened structural damage (cf. Jackson, 2014, p. 47). Entering a London cellar in the 1830s and 1840s was an extremely hazardous act, and you would most likely have quickly found yourself sinking into an excremental marsh.

The cellar into which Sweeney Todd drops his victims and then butchers them would also have contained his cesspool, and it is fitting, therefore, that these victims are then processed by him into meat and waste product. Indeed, his cellar becomes a kind of cesspool itself, into which he deposits the human beings he considers disposable. Like most cesspools, Sweeney Todd's cellar is located beneath a chair from which its contents (this time, murdered customers) drop, awaiting removal by the night soil man (in this case, Todd himself), making room for the next waste deposit. Todd is a brilliant recycler of waste, and there was a veritable obsession with the possibilities of such salvaging in Victorian culture, with numerous schemes devised as ways to transform shit into cash (for waste recycling see Schuelting, 2016, pp. 29-35). If London in Victorian Gothic became a kind of replacement for the castle and estates of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, then the subterranean passages of those ancient estates were substituted by the extraordinary network of cellars, pipes, sewers, drains, and cesspools in operation under the streets and houses (Jackson, 2014, pp. 46-68). Sweeney Todd's waste management system is merely a much more efficient and effective version of the one slowly being constructed in the depths of Victorian London. From one perspective, the novel can be described as concerned with the relationship between downstairs and upstairs, the dependence of respectability on a hidden world of subterranean waste circulation, and the transformation of human beings into a mass of stinking, disgusting, miasmatic gloop once they descend into this secret world. The crucible of horror which is the cellar and tunnel network beneath Todd's, St. Dunstan's, and Mrs. Lovett's, is as filthy and disgusting as the actual underground tunnels of Victorian London. Within this fetid network, however, Todd manages to provide meat for the tastiest pies of London town.

Waste becomes food in *String*, as the customers of Mrs. Lovett's pie shop actually eat their neighbours, friends and relatives, as well as the strangers who had the misfortune to visit Todd's for a shave. The novel is not so much interested in the contamination of foodstuffs by excrement as Sally Powell argues (Powell, 2004, pp. 52-53), as the actual transformation of shit itself into food. The Londoners of *String* consume their own waste matter, fed back to them as meat pies. Thus, while some human waste causes an almighty stink in St. Dunstan's, more of it ends up on the shelves of Mrs. Lovett's shop. One place smells stomach churning, and the other makes a stomach growl, but crucially both smells are actually caused by the same process, the transformation of human bodies into a delicious snack. Analogously, the connecting tunnels between Todd's barbershop and Mrs. Lovett's pie shop are a kind of alimentary canal running the wrong direction in the body of London city. London is, of course, frequently anthropomorphised, and

famously, in his 'biography' of the city, Ackroyd starts with a chapter on London as 'body': 'the byways of the city resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs. In the mist and rain of an urban autumn, the shining stones and cobbles of the older thoroughfares look as if they are bleeding…It is fleshy and voracious, grown fat upon its appetite for people and for food, for goods and drinks; it consumes and it excretes…' (Ackroyd, 2000, p. 1). Edwin Chadwick himself thought of London as a body and, in response to the unworkable excremental system of the sewers, recommended the introduction of a 'venous and arterial system' to clean up the place (Finer, 1970, p. 223). In *String*, the anthropomorphism is monstered, as the body is dysfunctional. Faecal matter, human waste, is fed back to London's body through the mouth.

Ironically, while St. Dunstan's stinks, the same human remains causing the 'abominable' smell are generate the enticing and mouth-watering smells emanating from Mrs. Lovett's pie shop. Their connection is emphasised by the narrator, who describes how congregants are so disgusted by the monstrous odour of the church that they are 'seen to slink into Bell Yard … and then and there to relieve themselves with a pork or veal pie, in order that their mouths and noses should be full of a delightful and agreeable flavour, instead of one most peculiarly and decidedly the reverse' (*SP*, p. 151). The use of the verb 'relieve' here is, I suggest, an obvious (though still amusing) joke alerting the reader to the link between eating fast food and the act of excretion. Mrs. Lovett's shop is horrifically both a toilet and a restaurant, or a restaurant in a toilet.

The novel acts as a darkly humorous reminder to its readers that, the mass consumption of excrement was not, in fact, Gothic fiction in the 1840s and 1850s, but sadly, everyday reality for Londoners. As Sally Powell points out, 'the supply of water to which … Londoners were subject was proven to contain a significant amount of corporeal matter' – especially of the excreted kind (Powell, 2004, p. 52). By the time *String* was published, the flush lavatory, or the water closet, had been installed in many homes, but rather than help waste management, it just made things worse, as with the addition of water cesspools filled up even quicker than usual. Wealthier inhabitants of London responded to this problem by illegally connecting their private cesspools to the public sewerage system, which helpfully took away the excrement-filled water and dumped it…into the river Thames. As Jerry White colourfully puts it, in the 1820s and 1830s the sewer system became 'efficient at shooting shit into the Thames' (White, 2007, p. 50), which quickly turned into a brown-coloured river Styx (as it was sometimes depicted in the popular press), or the real world equivalent of the chocolate river in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Soon millions of tonnes of waste were being dumped annually into the Thames (Ackroyd, 2014, pp. 74-75), and since the river was the main source of the city's drinking water, Londoners were forced to consume their own excrement, and discussed this consumption with

considerable fascination. Urbanites had been well aware that they were consuming their own shit and piss since at least 1827. In that year the journalist John Wright's *The Dolphin, or Grand Junction Nuisance; proving that Seven Thousand Families in Westminster and its Suburbs are supplied with Water in a state offensive to the sight, disgusting to the imagination*, *and destructive of health*, was a bestseller, and it pointed out that the Grand Junction Water Works Company's pipe in the Thames was located next to a major sewer, which meant that its customers were getting some very flavoured water pumped directly into their streets and houses.

String, then, is as 'realist' a Gothic text as anything by Charles Dickens, and it should be read as simultaneously responding to existing sanitary conditions in London, and also the official tendency to differentiate between the kinds of living conditions the working class was expected to put up with, and those enjoyed by the wealthy sections of the city. It is important that Todd dispatches customers who have either ready cash or valuable items that can be fenced later (such as the eponymous pearl necklace). In what could be read as a response to the prevailing sanitation discourse which read dirt and filth as functions of the filthiness of the immigrant and poor populations of slum areas, *String* dramatically levels the playing field by expanding the metaphor of humans as excrement vertically, an expansion that eventually takes in practically everyone in the city. After all, the social and geographical reach of Mrs. Lovett's customer base is extensive. Although a great many of her customers of the shop are legal clerks and solicitors, as 'one of the most celebrated shops for the sale of veal and pork that London ever produced' everyone actually crowds in: 'High and low, rich and poor' (*SP*, p. 29). Indeed, there is a sense in which everyone in the city ends up with a pie, as friends carry some of the pies 'to great distances', 'to the suburbs of the city as quite a treat' (*SP*, p. 29), and thousands of the things are made every night to be loaded onto the carts to be sent 'all over the suburbs of London' (*SP*, p. 93). If you are what you eat, then Mrs. Lovett's pies turns everyone into excrement.

It is true to say, though, that even though the human pies are consumed by everyone, distributed far and wide, and eaten by poor shop assistants as well as prosperous jewellery shop owners, the novel does focus on the customers who come from the near-by Lincoln's-inn, and takes particular pleasure at the end of the text, when the actual contents of the pies are revealed to startled well-heeled customers: 'How frightfully sick about forty lawyers' clerks became all at once, and how they spat out the gelatinous clinging portions of the rich pies they had been devouring' (*SP*, p. 280). All customers, though, are completely (though admittedly unwittingly) crazed with hunger for human flesh. Customers 'smacked their lips, and sucked in the golopshious gravy of the pies' (*SP*, p. 279), and the bodies of both known and unknown clients of the barber are broken down into a mass of dismembered limbs, pulped and then meatified for mass ingestion. Humans become gelatinous and disgusting (though incredibly enticing) globs of meat:

> delicious pies; there was about them a flavour never surpassed, and rarely equalled; the paste was of the most delicate construction, and impregnated with the aroma of a delicious gravy that defies description. Then the small portions of meat which they contained were so tender, and the fat and the lean so artistically mixed up, that to eat one of Lovett's pies was such a provocative to eat another, that many persons who came to lunch stayed to dine ….(*SP*, p. 29).

The emphasis here is on the conversion of human subjectivity into so much ooze, slime and simultaneously tantalising and nauseating gore. Like a kind of organic beef farming gone crazy, the distances between the farm, the slaughter house, the meat factory and the pie shop are radically reduced, and the meat sold is prime cuts (the baker is relieved to find that 'there is nothing wrong' with the pies [*SP,* p. 172], by which he means that the food is unadulterated), yet these have come from a sewer-like underground system and are made of human flesh. Customers end up feasting on their friends and relatives, and thoroughly enjoying the experience. I think the suggestion here is that there is, perhaps, not much difference between humans and the waste products they 'manufacture' and the meat they usually consume.

As these bodies are taken to pieces and placed on the shelves of the pie-making manufactory, 'ranged in shelves either in lumps or steaks' (*SP*, p. 97), bodily cohesion is undermined, and the integrity human self is placed under radical threat. Many theorists and analysts of horror have recently used the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to argue that, in the kinds of disembodiment found in contemporary body horror and torture pornography, a version of radical freedom can be found (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996, p. 8). For Deleuze & Guattari, the corporeal is precisely one of the elements of an oppressive world that needs to be overturned in order to achieve true freedom, and this argument has been useful for critics who see in the disintegration of the body in slasher and torture pornography a means to push the body beyond the confines of normative discourse. As the body is disintegrated it is transformed from a fixed entity into one in process, the 'becoming' body, the body in constant flux. The body destroyed and dismembered is also a body that can be read as ontologically disruptive, destabilizing notions of the body as an organic whole. Jay McRoy asks whether 'graphic displays of cinematic terror inevitably confound, if not outrightly escape, humanist notions of a consolidated corporeal and social body?', to which the answer (for many horror critics) appears to be: yes (McRoy, 2010, p. 197). In a related argument, Mikita Brottman argues that 'the pleasure of *cinéma vomitif* is a physical pleasure that splits the body into fragments, fetishes, and other sites of libidinal playfulness. In this kind of cinema, the body loses its individual definition and is collectivized at a transindividual level' (Brottman, 1997, p. 4). Despite the attractions of this line of argument, the attack on bodily integrity in *String* has rather less theoretically breath-taking effects. Rather than

setting the readers or its characters free to 'become', the radical desubjectification that Todd practices upon his clients reduces them to the status of food and faeces.

That the primary location of the almighty stench in the novel is a Christian church is not, I think, accidental. Drawing on the Enon Chapel scandal, the novel directs its sceptical focus on Christianity, with its traditional view of human beings as a special creation. The human bodies interred in the vaults of St. Dunstan are effectively sent to a kind of hell presided over by a Georgian Satan. The cellar in Mrs. Lovett's is 'of vast extent, and of dim and sepulchral aspect' tiled in red, furnished with a furnace from which 'gleaming lights seem to be peeping out' and 'a strange, hissing, simmering sound' emanates, while 'the whole air is impregnated with a rich and savoury vapour' (*SP*, pp. 92-93), a hell-hole of constant manufacture. Todd himself, with a laugh like a 'devil-noise' (*SP*, p. 7), is frequently treated as potentially demonic, and one character believes that if 'anyone had the assistance of the devil himself in conducting human affairs, I should say that by some means Mrs. Lovett had made it worth the while of that elderly individual to assist her' (*SP*, p. 174). The fervent prayers and pleas for mercy and compassion by the victims of Todd and Lovett meet with only more horror. 'God help me!', cries the poor baker Skinner, trapped in Lovett's cellars, and his cry is answered by Sweeney Todd, who smashes in his skull with a double headed hammer (*SP*, pp. 95-97). As Todd's assistant Tobias is being tortured in a madhouse, he begs for mercy, to which he is given the reply: 'Mercy! What the devil do you mean by mercy? Well, that's a good joke' (*SP*, p. 164). Unsurprisingly, Todd likes his apprentices to be boys of a 'religious turn' since 'the imagination in such cases has been cultivated at the expense of the understanding' (*SP*, p. 243). He understandably dismisses religious belief as useful 'superstition' which provides him with a train of easily manipulated sidekicks (*SP*, p. 264).

St. Dunstan's congregants perceive 'a strange and most abominable odour throughout that sacred edifice' (*SP*, p. 149), a smell that is both very physical, in that it emanates from the body parts crammed below the church, and existential, related to the crisis of faith that is about to erupt in the culture of the first readers. As Tom Crook explains, in Victorian culture, dirt was considered a metaphysical as well as a physical property, and 'endowed with the same mysterious, clandestine powers primitive cultures associated with the taboo'. He points to the engineer Henry Sanderson's 1847 *A Plan for a Effectual General System of Sewage for the Cities of London and Westminster and their Suburbs*, and its description of the 'evils of the cesspool', whose 'sulphuretted hydrogen and putrid effluvia' seep 'through the public gratings of gully holes, and the private sinkholes of all class of houses', escaping from the poorer districts and polluting the air of London itself with an ontological threat (Crook, 2008, p. 207). In *String*, those who open St. Dunstan's in the morning do so with handkerchiefs soaked in vinegar over their noses, 'just as the people used to do in the time of the great plague of London'

(*SP*, p. 150), and as the 'stinkifications' get out of control, the churchwardens become convinced that something 'pestilential' is on the loose and that they might be the first victims. Human beings are the source, as well as the primary victims, of this physical and moral pollution, the implication being, perhaps, that the planet would be much better off without them.

Cannibalism had long been a transgression thought peculiar to uncivilized inhabitants of far-flung lands, but it is here discovered being perpetrated by the inhabitants of the most civilised city on earth (for an excellent analysis of 'colonial cannibalism, see Brown, 2013, pp. 17-82). While, of course, the customers of Mrs. Lovett's shop don't know that they are eating their friends and relatives, their conversation is full of cannibalistic and bestial language anyway which suggests that only a thin veneer of pseudo-sophistication differentiates them from the supposed barbarians in foreign lands. One customer announces that he used to eat with his uncle so as to financially leach him dry, 'but since he disappeared one day, I live on Lovett's pies, instead of the old buffer' (*SP*, p. 252). Another customer, whose husband has been killed by Todd, and turned into a pie, is urged by Sweeney to 'lift up the top crust' of the pie she has just purchased, 'for you will soon see *something* of Mr. Wrankley' (*SP*, p. 266). Yet another announces: 'I would eat my mother, if she was a pork-chop, done brown and crisp, and the kidney in it…grilling hot' (*SP*, p. 263). Even Mark Ingestrie, trapped down in the cellar to make the pies, turns into a frighteningly obsessed human meat-eater for a while, ingesting (as his name dictates) an enormous quantity of human flesh: 'he tasted them half-cooked, he tasted them wholly cooked, and he tasted them overdone; hot and cold, pork and veal with seasoning, and without seasoning, until at last he had had them in every possible way and shape' (*SP*, p. 172).

Although Sally Powell powerfully argues that in *String*, 'representations of the pulverized and processed body speak implicitly of the exploitation of the worker, the inhuman demands of the employer, and the blind appetite of the consumer for the desirable and affordable product' (Powell, 2004, p. 54), in fact it is *not* just the working class body that is exploited, pulverized and made into meat (indeed, more often it is the rich who end up in the pies, as they possess something Todd can sell). Just as Todd does not have any class prejudices and will kill anyone he believes it useful to, the pies contain the flesh of an unknown and terrifyingly large multitude of all classes and no class. All are meat. All are ooze. And, perhaps worst of all, all are excrement. Although a case could be made that *String* is really interested in classifying certain elements of city life as cannibalistic consumers and exploiters who munch through the human detritus thrown up by the anonymous forces of city life, this analysis would hardly register the sheer exuberance and joy found in the scenes in *String* involving the consumption of the human pies. Just at the time when sanitation campaigners were trying to convince London officials to clean up their act, and clean up the city, *String* suggests that such a cleansing would

make little difference to the fact that human beings are, basically, cannibalistic, excremental creatures, and that (perhaps) a city as dirty as London is the natural habitat of such a species.

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