

VLADIMIR PROPP'S MORPHOLOGY APPLIED TO
SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (2007)

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Introduction

Aristotle was arguably the first literary critic, recording his observations of tragic Greek theater in his *Poetics*. Written as lecture notations on the theory of the dramatic theater, the *Poetics* dissects the Greek tragedy based on Aristotle's observations and organizes them according to these observations.¹ In a similar method to Aristotle, Russian scholar Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale*, outlined and defined the crucial structures of Russian folktales based on his examination of these narratives. Through extensive study of Russian folktale, he uncovered common themes and plot devices that recur in predictable manners. He works through 31 “narratemes,” or plot elements, which are essential to the Russian folktale, and further divides and defines them with mathematical precision.²

Through the application of Propp’s 31 narratemes, this paper will analyze the 2007 film *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* and exemplify the utility that such analysis can offer in providing an additional lens through which to view the film.

Overview of Propp and his contemporaries

Writing in the twentieth century, Vladimir Propp is a figure in Structuralism, the broad movement that uses linguistics as the foundation for cultural, literary, sociological, and psychological study. A structuralist approach to literary or narrative analysis utilizes the text or artifact as a self-contained source of information rather than incorporate the influencing factors of historical context, author, or audience into the analysis. In literature, a structuralist would recognize an overarching narrative structure and make connections to other systems and examples. In this way, Propp’s morphology that maps a model by which all Russian folktales adhere is entirely structuralist.

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was a structuralist contemporary to Vladimir Propp. Lévi-Strauss is most noted for his extensive analysis of the natural state of man and the

relationship between structures such as language and myth.³ Published in 1928, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* would serve to influence Lévi-Strauss and other cultural theorists.

Historical overview of *Sweeney Todd*

In his review of *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd* by Robert L. Mack, Rohan McWillaim observes that "The homicidal barber was one of the most recognizable figures of Victorian popular culture and has proved to be one of the most enduring."⁴ Sweeney Todd was first introduced in the novel *The String of Pearls*, which was published anonymously throughout issues of *People's Periodical and Family Library* in 1846-47.⁵

The story was quickly adapted for theater by George Dibdin Pitt in 1847 under the title "The String of Pearls, or the Fiend of Fleet Street," and audiences were thrilled by the gloomy drama.⁶ The production was revived in 1973 by playwright Christopher Bond who adapted the story for modern audiences and reinforced the characters with a new depth and darkness. A decade later, Stephen Sondheim's musical adaptation presented new imagery, themes, and motifs that accompanied a musical translation.⁷ With every iteration of Sondheim's production, variations in character portrayal and direction would alter the way in which the story was told.

The 2007 film adaptation of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, directed by Tim Burton, offers a reinterpretation of the dark thriller. With his grim-yet-whimsical approach to narrative, Burton—along with his new cast—introduced Sweeney Todd to the twenty-first century.⁸

Identifying Propp's character types in *Sweeney Todd*

In his morphology, Propp defines eight character types that comprise his "Dramatis Personae": Hero, Helper, Villain, False Hero, Donor, Dispatcher, Princess, and the Princess' Father.⁹ Before applying Propp's plot analysis to *Sweeney Todd* it is necessary to categorize each

character by the role he or she fulfills in the film. Propp defines his Hero throughout his *Morphology*. Most significantly, the Hero is present from the beginning of the story¹⁰ and must depart on a search or quest;¹¹ the Hero is the narrative's central character.

Although the character of Sweeney Todd is far from the traditional portrayal of the Hero, he does fulfill this character type according to Propp as he is the major character whom the narrative follows; he is the character with whom the reader empathizes, however reluctantly. Following the logic that Todd portrays the Hero, the argument should be made that Judge Turpin serves as the Villain. It is on Turpin that Todd seeks his revenge, as he serves as the primary antagonist to Todd. Ironically, it is Turpin who fulfills Propp's role of the Princess's Father; while Todd is the biological father of Johanna, she is held against her will as Turpin's ward.

Both the Donor and the Helper roles are fulfilled by Mrs. Lovett as she returns Todd's razor set to him and encourages him to continue his murderous streak. The False Hero is fulfilled by Signor Pirelli, who is Todd's first victim following his threat of blackmail. Johanna is the simplest character to identify as the Princess; she is stolen and locked away by Turpin only to become Anthony's object of desire.

Sweeney Todd does not seem to have a clear role of Dispatcher. Propp defines the Dispatcher as a character who initially sends the Hero on his quest.¹² Because Todd is motivated by his own revenge, arguments could be made either that he does not require a Dispatcher or he fulfills the role himself through his acts of revenge.

The characters of Beadle, Toby, Anthony, and Lucy are not concisely categorized by Propp's analysis. Beadle's character aids the villainous Turpin as if to mirror Mrs. Lovett's Helper role to Todd. Toby serves as a conscience to Mrs. Lovett while she and Todd are carrying out their serial murders, and Anthony serves as a secondary Hero in the story. Madly in love with Johanna, he is on his own quest to rescue her from Turpin. Truly the virtuous Hero in the story,

Anthony is arguably the sole Hero in the story. For the following analysis, however, the focus will remain on Todd as the Hero due to the nature of the narrative: The story is centered on Todd for the duration of the film although Anthony's secondary plot is interspersed throughout the film. Anthony's storyline serves as a foil to Todd's storyline rather than to overshadow it as an imposing Hero narrative.

Application of Propp to the plot of *Sweeney Todd*

Propp's first narrateme, absentation, occurs when "one of the members of a family absents himself from home."¹³ In *Sweeney Todd*, the titular character is cast away by the judge before the film's opening scenes. The audience stumbles across Todd aboard a merchant ship approaching London. The young sailor, Anthony, happens to be aboard the same ship approaching London. Todd reveals to Anthony that "there's no place like London" that compares to it in the cruelty of humanity. Todd tells Anthony how he was once a young barber with a wife and baby, Lucy and Johanna, when, by the order of the cruel Judge Turpin, Todd was jailed and exiled so that Turpin could seduce Lucy. At this point, Todd does not know what has become of Lucy, Johanna, or Turpin.

In seeking out Lucy and Johanna, Todd returns to the ramshackle building on Fleet Street that was home to his family. He finds the pie shop of Mrs. Lovett below their residence. She relays that her business is barely afloat, admitting she serves "the worst pies in London." She serves Todd as he listens silently and avoids eating the pies. Mrs. Lovett, rambling, complains about the rising prices of meat and begins to speculate about a competitor's pie shop; Mrs. Mooney's neighbors' cats have been disappearing, and Mrs. Lovett insinuates that Mrs. Mooney has resorted to cooking cats in lieu of beef or pork. While this instance does not fulfill Propp's definition of "interdiction" it does offer an early instance of foreshadowing into the rest of the film.

As the exchange continues, Mrs. Lovett seems to recognize Todd as being the former Benjamin Barker, the local barber who was “a proper artist with a knife.” She relays Todd’s own story of how the beautiful Lucy was pursued by Turpin. He sent his crony, Beadle, to fetch her and bring her to Turpin’s masquerade party. During the party, the Judge drugged and raped her. This story serves to illustrate the character of Turpin and warn Todd of his cruelty. In doing so, Mrs. Lovett’s story also serves as Propp’s interdiction.

Enraged, Todd interrupts Mrs. Lovett’s account of the story and his identity is confirmed. When asked about Lucy’s current whereabouts, Mrs. Lovett tells Todd she poisoned herself, and Turpin is holding Johanna as his ward. Sweeney Todd swears he will have revenge for the false charges brought against him and the crimes against his wife and child. This moment of heated revenge is Propp’s violation of the interdiction. Although he has been warned about Turpin from Mrs. Lovett, Todd vows to set these wrongs right.

Mrs. Lovett brings Todd to the apartment above her pie shop, where she uncovers Todd’s set of silver razors from beneath the floorboards. The film lingers on the moment in which Todd admires the blades. He reflects on his former life with the razors and daydreams about his future with them. Todd refers to them as his “friends:”

Speak to me, friend; whisper, I'll listen.
I know, I know, you've been locked out of sight
All these years! Like me, my friend!
Well, I've come home to find you waiting!
Home, and we're together,
And we'll do wonders
Won't we?¹⁴

The importance of this reuniting of Todd with his blades is not lost on the viewer. It is in this instance that one deviates from Propp’s morphology chronologically and jump to his narrateme in which the hero is granted a magical agent. Propp insists that, because plot events are defined by their adjoining events, the sequence of his narratemes is crucial to a morphological analysis.

However, one can argue that a narrateme can not only be defined by the surrounding events but may additionally be determined by their effects later in the story. In *Sweeney Todd*, it is Todd's razor blades that serve as the inanimate objects that grant him his "ability" or trade. It is with these blades that he previously made his living, but will now use to carry out serial killings.

Meanwhile, the narrative switches to Anthony's perspective on events of his first day back in London. Wandering around the streets, he happens across Judge Turpin's residence and sees the beautiful Johanna from her second-story bedroom window. A madwoman approaches Anthony on the street and informs him that it is in fact the Turpins' manor. She warns him of Turpin's protectiveness over Johanna, and urges him to keep his distance. Mirroring Mrs. Lovett's warnings to Todd about Turpin, the madwoman offers a secondary interdiction to Anthony. Yet, he walks away, determined, insisting "I'll steal you, Johanna."¹⁵

Turpin notices the interest that Anthony has for Johanna and invites him into his study. The invitation quickly becomes a warning that Anthony keep his distance from Johanna. Turpin sends Beadle to beat Anthony and throw him on the street.

Propp's next several narratemes involving the actions of the Villain are not performed by Turpin. Rather, they can be found in Todd's introduction and competition with Pirelli, the False Hero. Having challenged the authenticity of Pirelli's "Miracle Elixir" in a shaving competition, Todd gains notoriety in the neighborhood and an enemy in Pirelli. Following the competition, Pirelli calls on Todd in his apartment. Pirelli reveals his true identity along with his recognition of Todd being the former Benjamin Barker. Under threat of exposing Todd, Pirelli attempts to blackmail him for all profits Todd would make from his barbershop. Enraged, Todd beats Pirelli with a tea kettle and slits his throat with a razor. This outburst marks the beginning of Todd's serial murders.

The previous scenes comprise Propp's narratemes of “reconnaissance,” “delivery,” and “trickery” in which the Villainⁱ deceives the Hero or other character and gains information. Pirelli serves as the Villain in this instance, but he fails in his pursuits. He is quickly defeated by Todd; Todd’s success in this instance is his first act of violence and catalyzes his future killing spree.

The following scenes reveal Propp’s next narrateme in which the Villain reveals his desire. Turpin informs Beadle that he wishes to marry Johanna. Under Beadle’s advice, Turpin goes to Todd for a shave. Todd finds himself overjoyed as the judge has stepped directly in the path of his revenge. Todd escorts Turpin to the barber’s chair and begins the shaving process. During the encounter, Turpin notifies Todd of his intentions of marriage, further motivating Todd’s revenge. However, before Todd has his chance to take his revenge on Turpin, Anthony barges through the door to the shop. Turpin rages at the sight of him, and leaves, cursing Todd. The previous scene fulfills Propp’s “mediation” as Todd discovers Turpin’s intentions. The “counteraction” to this discovery, rather than the intended murder of Turpin, is the failed attempt itself with Anthony’s interruption.

The following morphological narratemes are that of “departure” and “testing” in which the Hero leaves on a quest and is tested for his heroic qualities. In the case of *Sweeney Todd*, this “departure” is not physical; rather, it is the mental exploration by Mrs. Lovett and Todd as they, together, twist their discontent with contemporary social structure into a motivation for the repeated slaughter, harvest, and distribution of human meat. Rather than exhibit Propp’s heroic qualities, *Sweeney Todd* shows its audience the opposite of every expected quality of a Hero. Todd despises his fellow man, declaring “We all deserve to die.”¹⁶ Todd’s disgust for humanity

ⁱ In this case Pirelli serves as both the Villain and the False Hero.

is proven in the montage showing the series of murders and sudden success of Mrs. Lovett's meat pie shop.

In the final scenes of the film, Turpin returns to Todd's barbershop with an understanding that Todd is aiding him in keeping Anthony from Johanna. In accordance with Propp's morphology, Todd finally succeeds in killing Turpin, but in doing so also kills his wife disguised as a madwoman and Mrs. Lovett. Out of fear, rage, and disgust, Toby kills Todd.

The final sphere of Propp's morphology containing the return of the Hero is not present in *Sweeney Todd*. Certain elements, such as the union of the Hero and Princess, may be implied through the success of Anthony and Johanna, as it is presumed that they escape London together. However, the audience is not made aware of their situation within the narrative.

Problems with a morphological analysis of single narrative

In Chapter 4 of *Morphology*, Propp addresses complications that arise when applying his defined character functions to a broad range of folktales. Aware that his observations on the folktale do not always adhere cleanly to every story, he insists that "one becomes convinced that [the functions of a character] must also be defined independently of how and in what manner they are fulfilled."¹⁷ In other words, "In these instances it is always possible to be governed by the principle of defining a function according to its consequences."¹⁸ Although the functions of a character may seem unclear, one may simply examine the surrounding actions to define the function.

Propp continues by acknowledging the issue that some functions fulfill multiple roles morphologically and even the phenomenon that functions may occur outside of his given chronology.¹⁹

We consequently see that the means by which functions are fulfilled influence one another, and that identical forms adapt themselves to different functions. A certain form is transferred to a different position,

acquiring a new meaning, or simultaneously retaining an old one. All of these phenomena complicate the analysis and require special attention when being compared to one another.²⁰

Although these instances may obscure the analysis, as we have seen in the morphological analysis of Sweeney Todd, Propp maintains its significance. In particular, Propp argues for the broad morphological analysis of folktales rather than the singular study: “The conclusions of such a study will be shaky and incorrect, since each element may also be encountered in another application and may have its own history.”²¹ The analysis of Sweeney Todd alone is not enough to render conclusive evidence of the themes, symbols, and motifs. However, should one extend this application into other films or stage productions of a similar genre, one may reach substantial conclusions congruent to the conclusions met by Propp on the genre of Russian folktale.

Response to criticisms of Propp

In his 1988 article, “ApPropriations and ImPropperties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative,” David Bordwell discusses the phenomenon of film critics readily applying Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* to contemporary artifacts in film and television. He argues that issues exist when attempting to apply Propp’s morphology to a new media for which it was not intentionally designed. Bordwell emphasizes that Propp is simply constructing observations of Russian folktales and applying a taxonomic structure to a preexisting framework for a type of narrative. Bordwell points out the inherent restrictions and exclusions of Propp’s morphology, and he offers the ideas of other theorists who serve the analysis more effective. He concludes his article by insisting that Propp’s analysis is justified when analyzing some forms of narrative (exclusively Russian folktales), but he restates his thesis that Propp’s popularity within film studies is unwarranted.²²

In contrast, Terence Murphy's *From Fairy Tale to Film Screenplay* is addressed to students of film who seek to understand the plots of screenplay. In his chapter titled "Vladimir Propp's Functional Analysis of the Fairy Tale" Murphy specifically discusses Propp's morphology. He briefly covers the history of Russian Structuralism, including its ties to the descriptive—rather than prescriptive—nature of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Murphy notes the work of Russian theorists Shklovsky and Nikiforov as integral to the baseline of morphological analysis prior to Propp. While neither theorist expanded the analysis as much as Propp, they provided the theoretical foundation on which he would build his *Morphology of the Folktale*.²³

Murphy emphasizes the significance of Propp's work in the latter half of the chapter: "The key innovation in Propp's method was his adoption of a functional approach to plot analysis."²⁴ Rather than define a character by his given traits, Propp chose to define each character by the role he played in the plot. Murphy continues by summarizing the character types described by Propp. At the end of the chapter he includes a list of Propp's 31 narratemes and a brief list and descriptions of Propp's eight character types.

Bordwell, Murphy and Propp seem to agree that a morphological analysis of a single narrative would provide little benefit. However, Murphy and Propp recognize the significance that the roles a character fulfills—rather than his characteristics—define the character within the context of the narrative. While a morphological analysis may be criticized because Propp's application is strictly to Russian folktales, its further application can be valuable in understanding—and to some degree quantifying—the structure of a narrative, whether it be text, screenplay, or film.

Conclusion

While Bordwell's criticism of Propp's morphology is helpful in understanding a well-rounded perspective of this method of analysis, the exercise of applying Propp's analysis to film

is fundamentally beneficial as a researcher. Propp himself addresses problematic usages of his analysis including the instance of a researcher conducting a morphological analysis on a singular artifact. Propp structured his analysis to draw conclusions based on the sum of hundreds of different narratives of the same genre. To do otherwise would be inherently flawed. This paper, rather than attempting to reach conclusions about a genre of narratives, or even a series of historically related narratives, applies Propp's morphological analysis to a single artifact for the sake of its own practice. Too little information is achieved to reach any significant conclusions. One studies and applies Propp's morphology to film or literature for the same reason that one may study Aristotle's observations of the Greek tragedy.

Propp concludes *Morphology* with a quote from Russian literary theorist Alexander Veselovsky:

Is it permissible in this field also to consider the problem of typical schemes...schemes handed down for generations as ready-made formulae capable of becoming animated with a new mood, giving rise to new formations?... Contemporary narrative literature, with its complicated thematic structure and photographic reproduction of reality apparently eliminates the very possibility of such a question. But when this literature will appear to future generations as distant as antiquity, from prehistoric to medieval times, seems to us at present...and the phenomena of schematism and repetition will then be established across the total expanse.²⁵

In perhaps the most profound summary of the significance of this type of literary analysis, Propp cites Veselovsky. Literary analysis serves to note certain patterns and “schematism” that may not prove momentous until what is now contemporary literature becomes antiquated. Similarly, when performing analysis of historic texts, certain patterns may only become apparent because one is distanced from the text by time. In a single application of morphology to a modern narrative such as the film adaptation of *Sweeney Todd*, seemingly minimal value may be produced at present. However, it is through systematic research that one may further the

understanding of the individual story, and—most importantly—serve as a platform for further Proppian analysis of film.

Endnotes

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Translated by S.H. Butcher, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>.
2. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, (The American Folklore Society and Indiana University, 2009).
3. William Rose Benet, “Levi-Strauss, Claude.” *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., 565AA, New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
4. Rohan McWilliam, “The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd: The Life and Times of an Urban Legend by Robert L. Mack,” *Victorian Studies*, 50, no. 4 (2008): 731, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060437>.
5. Ibid, 731.
6. Brown, Larry A. “Sondheim Notes.” Sondheim Notes. Accessed 24 April, 2017. <http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/Sondheim/sweeneytodd.htm>.
7. Ibid.
8. “Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street: Full Cast & Crew,” *Internet Movie Database*. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0408236/fullcredits?ref_=ttco_sa_1.
9. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 79-83.
10. Ibid, 84.
11. Ibid, 80.
12. Ibid, 80.
13. Ibid, 26.
14. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Dir. Tim Burton. DreamWorks, 2007. Film.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 66.
18. Ibid, 67.
19. Ibid, 71.
20. Ibid, 70.
21. Ibid, 115.

22. David Bordwell. "ApProppriations and ImPropprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative." *Cinema Journal*. 27, no. 3 (1988): 5-20. University of Texas Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225288>.
23. Murphy, Terence. *From Fairy Tale to Film Screenplay: Working with Plot Genotypes*. London, Palgrave Macmillan UK: 2005. 9-15.
24. Ibid, 14.
25. Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 116.

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