

Bloody Books:

Pulp Fiction in Victorian England

The Industrial Revolution was a profound economic shift away from manual labor and towards mechanized production processes of greater efficiency and output. It began in Great Britain during the late 1700s and continued into the 1840s, eventually spreading to continental Europe and the United States. Technological innovations abounded, resulting in cheaper products that could be made more quickly than ever before. Most of the new jobs related to these changes were based in cities. British workers looking for higher wages soon migrated from rural agrarian communities to urban production centers such as Edinburgh and London where well-paying industrial jobs were abundant.

A significant number of these migrants were literate; this fact, combined with increased income and cheaper means of print production, meant that there was a significant demand for reading material among the urban working class. In response, savvy publishers began to print cheap magazines, long serials, and novels in parts during the 1830s and 1840s that were aimed initially at working-class men and then later at a juvenile audience. These provocative, salacious, and violent stories often sold for a mere penny an issue, and British society used a blanket term to describe them: “penny dreadfuls”.

Case 1: Gothic Precursors to Penny Dreadfuls

Plagiarism was a common practice for penny dreadfuls, especially during their initial years of publication. Although technological advances had significantly reduced the cost of print production, the average novel still cost nearly an entire week’s wage for a working-class Londoner. However, popular novels of the time could and did serve as source material for more affordable publications, whether their authors approved or not. In particular, Gothic fiction from the late 1700s and early 1800s was a favorite well to

draw from. These novels, often set in isolated and dreary climes where the supernatural hovers always just beyond sight, provided the sort of dramatic content that penny dreadful audiences were eager to consume. However, the adaptation of these novels into penny dreadfuls often stripped away the convoluted plots and deeper themes traditionally portrayed in Gothic novels and instead cut to the chase by emphasizing spookiness, gore, and pervasive dread.

Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto, : A Story*. London: Printed for Tho. Lownds ..., 1765.
[Rare PR3757.W2 C3](#)

This 1765 novel established the genre of Gothic fiction. Walpole established numerous Gothic tropes in this work that later authors would build upon or re-employ for their own purposes: dark and foreboding environs, mysterious manors, and a pervading fear of the supernatural.

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Italian; or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance*. London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1797. 1st edition.
[Rare PR2502 .I83 1797](#)

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho : A Romance; Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brom, 1816. 7th edition.
[Ticknor LE R11m](#)

Building on Walpole's foundation of Gothic fiction in the 1760s, Ann Radcliffe single-handedly established an entire sub-genre in the 1790s known as Gothic romance. In Radcliffe's novels, many of the earlier hallmarks of Gothic fiction are present; however, she introduces three-dimensional female protagonists who actively overcome horrible events and circumstances in order to be with their soulmate. This interesting twist to the genre predictably did not make the leap from novel to penny bloods, which were targeted squarely at young working-class men.

Austen, Jane, and Henry Thomas Austen. *Northanger Abbey; and Persuasion ... with a Biographical Notice of the Author*. London: John Murray, 1818.
[Rare PR4034 .N67 1818](#)

Published posthumously in 1817 but written in 1803, Austen's stab at Gothic fiction is both a send-up of Gothic conventions and a societal critique of the conventions of marriage and gender roles within contemporary British society. In her narrative, Austen references Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* eighteen times (!) and holds up the conceits of Gothic horror as a foil for the injustices that a highly patriarchal society inflicted upon women.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Leipzig: In der Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1774.

[Rare PT1973 .A2 1774](#)

Goethe's epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) was a pillar of the German literary movement known as 'Sturm und Drang' (or, 'Storm and Stress'), a precursor to the British Romantic movement. These literary works were characterized by themes of hopeless love and violent or rash actions motivated by baser instincts such as revenge or greed. *Young Werther* appears in Shelley's *Frankenstein* as one of the first books read by Victor Frankenstein's creation, who internalizes many of the tropes as fact about human society.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Friedrich Schiller, Paul Gavarni, and Theodor Von Holst. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. Revised, Corrected, and Illustrated with a new introduction / by the author. London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley ..., 1831.

[Rare PR5397 .F7 1831](#)

It goes without saying that Mary Shelley's famous novel, originally published in 1818, is synonymous with the literary horror genre even today. Shelley's work is clearly influenced by a pre-existing Gothic literary tradition but brings the genre closer to reality by moving away from stereotypical villains or larger-than-life grotesques and instead positing a literal embodiment of hubristic scientific experimentation as the locus of horror. The frontispiece of this 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* is the first known illustration of Frankenstein's monster, who seems as horrified by his existence as his creator.

Polidori, John William, George Gordon Byron Byron, and John Mitford. *The Vampyre ; a Tale*. London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1819.

[Rare PR5187 .P5 V36](#)

John Polidori, probably best known as Lord Byron's personal physician, wrote *The Vampyre* (1819) as an outgrowth of the original story-telling contest held by Byron, Polidori, and Percy and Mary Shelley. Polidori's short story was the first modern vampire tale ever told. It wove various disparate bits of folklore into a cohesive narrative that provided a road map for a burgeoning subgenre of romantic literature centered around vampirism.

Case 2: Penny Bloods, Horror, and True Crime

Although the term “penny dreadful” is commonly used today to describe any cheap serial published during the 1800s, “penny blood” was the actual term initially used for any type of popular serial fiction during the 1830s and 1840s; common themes were Gothic horror in the tradition of earlier Gothic novels, current-day social ills, true crime, and rags-to-riches stories. Many of these publications were criticized and sometimes banned because they were seen as corrupting influences on working-class character and morality. In particular, penny bloods about true crime and all of its sordid details were blamed for the horrific acts committed by serial killers and sociopaths of the Victorian era.

Rymer, James Malcolm, and Thomas Peckett Prest. *Varney the Vampyre, or, the Feast of Blood: A Romance*. London: E. Lloyd, 1845.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR3991.A1 V27 1845](#)

Rymer’s *Varney the Vampyre* was arguably the most famous penny blood of its day, perhaps second only to *Sweeney Todd*. It was most likely based on John Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, which was published anonymously in 1819. However, there are also undertones of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: at one point, the unfortunate Varney, having just been hanged, is brought back to life by a medical student who runs electricity through his dead body. Because the author was paid by the line, *Varney* runs 232 chapters in length and contains over 660,000 words(!). Our complete original copy is one of only a handful that still survive.

Polidori, John William, George Gordon Lord Byron, and John Gillet. “The Vampyre: A Tale by Lord Byron.” In *The Vampyre: A Tale by Lord Byron.*, 1819.

[Penny Dreadfuls ; PR5187.P5 V367 1819](#)

Polidori’s anonymously-published vampire story was originally credited to Lord Byron, Romantic poet and initiator of the famous writing contest that also inspired Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The vampire for whom the story is named, Lord Ruthven, is the first depiction of the literary figure of the vampire as an aristocratic man possessed of an almost irresistible power over others, especially women. Ruthven exhibits many of the traits that we commonly associate with vampires today. He is pale, attractive to women, ruthless, murderous, and ultimately indifferent to the rest of the world.

The Vampire! Or, Bride of the Isles. Script by James Robinson Planche. Music by M. Moss. Theatre Royal, English Opera House. July 11, 1827.

[MS-1414, Box 1, Folder 6](#)

Given the popularity of *The Vampyre*, it's hardly surprising that *Varney* was such a huge success among working-class readers. Polidori's work was translated into German and French, and adapted into plays and operas, such as the one advertised in this promotional poster from 1827.

Reynolds, George W. M. (George William MacArthur). *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf: A Romance*. London: John Dicks, 1872.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR5221.R35 W346 1872](#)

Man-made monsters and vampires weren't the only popular anti-heroes of penny bloods; Wagner the Wehr-Wolf first appeared in *Reynold's Miscellany* between 1846 and 1847. Fernand Wagner's deal with the devil buys wealth and youth—at the price of monthly transformations into a ravening beast. This tale, written and published by G. W. M. Reynolds, is the first important fictional treatment of the werewolf theme in English literature.

Hazleton, Frederick. *Sweeney Todd, the Barber of Fleet Street, or, The String of Pearls: A Drama in Three Acts*. London; S. French, 1878.

[Williams/Watson PL5619](#)

The story of Sweeney Todd, the cannibalistic barber, first appeared in a story titled *The String of Pearls* by Thomas Prest in *Lloyd's People's Periodical* in 1846. The origins of the tale are murky and it's not known whether Todd was an actual figure or not. However, he would capture the imagination of the English-speaking world for many years to come; his tale has been adapted for stage and screen many times over the last 178 years. Perhaps the most well-known theater adaptation in recent memory was the 1979 musical by Steven Sondheim; a film adaptation by Tim Burton was released in 2007 starring Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, and Alan Rickman.

Sweeney Todd: The Barber of Fleet Street: A Thrilling Story of the Old City of London: Founded on Facts. London: A. Ritchie, 6 & 7, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1890.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR3991.A1 S944 1890z](#)

Some scholars suggest that the story of Sweeney Todd sprang from an 1820s story about a French barber who murdered several clients and turned them into pies in 1800. There was also a "Samuel Todd" who lived just off Fleet Street in the 1830s and was a pearl stringer by trade. Given that penny blood writers were frantically and continually borrowing from any number of sources in an attempt to complete their weekly story installments, perhaps Sweeney's creator saw the jewelry-maker's name and merged it with the French murder case.

The Life and Trial of Richard Turpin, a Notorious Highwayman : Containing a Particular Account of His Adventures, from His Being First Put an Apprentice to a Butcher in Whitechapel, to His Execution at York for Horse-Stealing. To Which Is Added, The Life of Sawney Beane, the Man Eater. A new edition, with Additions. London: Printed by Thomas Maiden for J. Roe and Anne Lemoine, 1808.

[Rare CT9981.T87 L54 1808](#)

In addition to fantastic tales of terror and nearly-unbelievable murder, penny bloods also pickpocketed stories from the pages of history, casting criminals and villains in a romanticized light, especially the highwayman, who was seen as “the aristocrat of criminals”. One such member of the criminal aristocracy, Dick Turpin, was the most popular highwayman of his day, initially portrayed as a brutal killer in the *Newgate Calendar*, a collection of moralizing tales about crimes and sin. Turpin received regular press in numerous serialized and ephemeral publications of the early 1800s, including this 1808 biographical chapbook.

Reynolds, George W. M. (George William MacArthur), George Vickers, P. P. (Peter Perring) Thoms, and J. J Wilkinson. *The Mysteries of London*. London: Geo. Vickers, 3, Catherine Street, Strand, 1845.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR5221.R35 M9 1845](#)

The squalor and suffering that urbanization and industrialization inflicted on the working class often made its way into the serial publications of Victorian England. Reynolds, the author of *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* also published a serial called *The Mysteries of London* in 1845 that was loosely based on Eugene Sue’s ground-breaking novel *The Mysteries of Paris*. In *The Mysteries of London*, Reynolds sketched out the various social strata of London at the time, showing both the hidden criminal world that preyed upon the lower classes as well as the corruption and obliviousness of London’s high society. At least one scholar has argued that *The Mysteries of London* was the most widely-read work of fiction in Great Britain during this period, even more than the works of Charles Dickens.

Hope, Esther. *The Blue Dwarf : A Novel*. London: E. Harrison, Exeter Change, Strand, 1861.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR4803.H417 B55 1861](#)

An excellent example of the Gothic merging with that of true crime, *The Blue Dwarf* is about a nobleman who loses his inheritance because of his unconventional looks. Denied his rightful societal due, the titular anti-hero becomes a highwayman and eventually the mentor of - you guessed it - Dick Turpin, who shows up regularly in this serialized work of fiction.

Pelham, Camden, and Hablot Knight Browne. *The Chronicles of Crime : Or The New Newgate Calendar*. London: Reeves and Turner, 1886.

[Sine Illus B767chro](#)

Books like *The Chronicles of Crime* or its predecessor *The Newgate Calendar* enticed readers with bibliographic sketches of the most sensational criminals of the day, the details of their crimes, and their ultimate fate. The introduction claims that the purpose of the book is to provide its readers with sobering examples of why crime doesn't pay. That pretence starts to wear thin while perusing the index, where each horrific crime shares top billing alongside the name of its perpetrator.

Case Three: Penny Dreadfuls and Juvenile Adventure

In the 1840s, the genre known first as penny bloods shifted away from Gothic horror and instead began to romanticize the criminal element in society. The newly coined term "penny dreadfuls" was applied to these swashbuckling tales of adventure by charming ne'er-do-wells that saturated the popular fiction market as publishers began to target young boys as their prime sales demographic. Much like the tales of Robin Hood today, penny dreadfuls championed vigilantes and exceptionally skilled criminals who lived by their own code and bucked the trends of conventional society. By the 1850s, penny dreadfuls were universally acknowledged to be juvenile fiction.

"The Spring Jack." In *The Spring Jack*, 1838.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR3991.A1 S675 1838](#)

The initial appearance of the character of Spring-Heeled Jack was in penny bloods from the 1830s. Clearly influenced by Gothic horror stories, he was supposedly a super-being with a long tail, wings like a bat, and horns like a goat who breathed coloured flames and leaped over high walls with ease. He usually arrived in a storm complete with a flash of lightning and a roll of thunder, to frighten evil-doers and spoil their nefarious schemes.

Lea, Charlton. *Spring-Heeled Jack*. London: Aldine Pub. Co., 1904. Issues 1-4.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR1309.P45 S67](#)

Unlike the first iteration of Spring-Heeled Jack as a quasi-supernatural creature, later appearances cast him as a normal man with who used a specially-designed bat-winged costume and various mechanical toys and gadgets to enact vigilante justice on criminals. The

connection to today's most famous comic book vigilante, Batman, seems unmistakable.

Purkess, George. *Charles Peace, or, The Adventures of a Notorious Burglar*. London: [George Purkess?] 56 Wych Street, Strand, W.C., 1879.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR3991.A1 C43 1879](#)

The story of Charles Peace, famously known as the “king of the burglars”, is based on the life of an actual criminal named Charles Peace who was also a murderer in addition to being a burglar. His life story lent itself well to a sympathetic telling; he was physically disabled by an industrial accident as a boy and only then turned to a life of crime. Eventually, Peace murdered a policeman who tried to apprehend him during a burglary attempt; he got away with that killing because of a lack of evidence but a subsequent murder landed him in prison, where he was executed in 1879.

Viles, Edward, J. F. (John Frederick) Smith, and E Harrison. *The Black Highwayman : Being the Second Series of Black Bess; or, The Knight of the Road*. London: E. Harrison, Salisbury Court, Fleet Street, 1866.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR5703.V69 B62 1866z](#)

This serial by Edward Viles was a follow-up to his story *Black Bess*, which was the most successful serial written about the highwayman Dick Turpin. Vile doesn't really try to alter his formula for success; *The Black Highwayman* continues to follow Turpin's exploits in much the same vein.

Viles, Edward. *Blueskin : A Romance of the Last Century. No. 1-158*. London: E. Harrison, 1865. 1:1.

[Penny Dreadfuls PR5703.V55 B558 1865](#)

This penny dreadful celebrates the common theme of the romanticized criminal. *Blueskin*, although ostensibly about its namesake Joseph Blake, was really more about his companion Jack Sheppard. Sheppard was a prison-breaking robber who died in 1724. Along with Dick Turpin, he was one of the most popular criminals portrayed during the penny dreadful era of the 1830s and 1840s.