



TIMMY

An Animated Film Exploring the Trivialization of the Macabre

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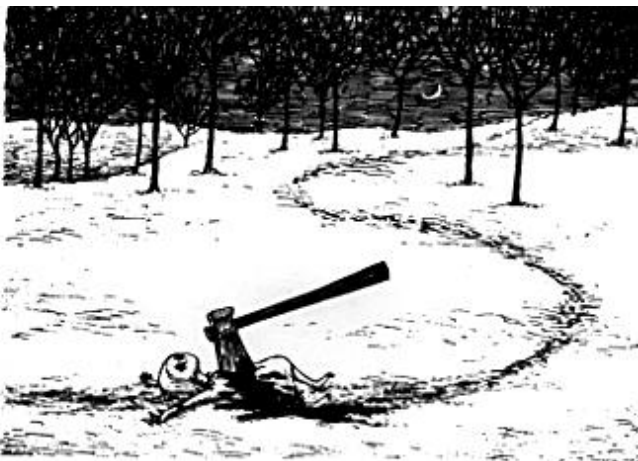
I have always been intrigued by the macabre. The things that terrify me also fascinate me. Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There* was one of my earliest favorite nightmares. *Outside Over There* is a picture book about a little girl's sister who is stolen by goblins and replaced with a child made of ice so that they can make the baby their goblin bride. As my fascination with what simultaneously chills and delights developed, I began to question my interest in it. For my integrative project, I decided to explore this allure to the morbid. I have created an animated film that explores dark themes, which, when put in the context of a playful medium and made more entertaining than frightening, make the viewer question his or her distance from the subject.



Illustration by Maurice Sendak from *Outside Over There*

What makes it okay to be entertained by Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, where in the course of one book, twenty-six children are killed off in gruesome ways? Why is *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, a musical about a deranged barber who kills hundreds of men by slitting their throats in an attempt to get revenge on a man who raped his wife and stole his daughter, amusing? The fact that these disturbing stories are so entertaining makes them that much more disturbing.

The childish and humorous qualities of the pieces trivialize the gore and allows the viewer to enjoy the



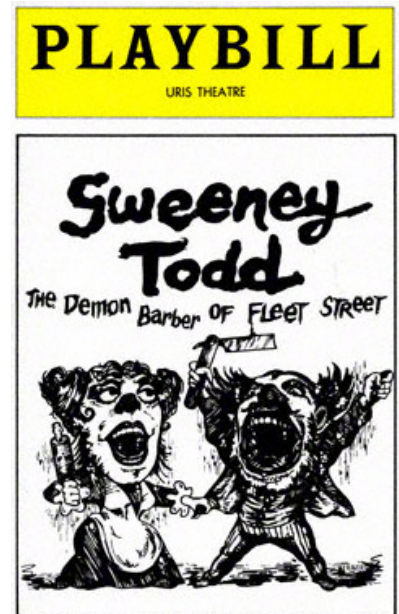
K is for **KATE** who was struck with an axe

Illustration by Edward Gory from *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*

work in the context of the picture book or musical, rather than horror. Edward Gorey's illustrations would frighten even if not accompanied by the story of children being poisoned, stabbed and drowned. He draws in a style characterized by highly contrasting thin black ink lines, creating illustrations with a dark depth that under any other circumstances, would seem shocking to find in the format of an illustrated children's book. Gorey trivializes these elements of his work by telling

the story as if it were a nursery rhyme. In *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, the murders and deaths of the children go by in alphabetical order starting with “Amy who fell down the stairs” and ending with “Zillah who drank too much gin”.

Despite the disturbing nature of the story, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* has a slight comedic twinge, mostly due to the fact that it is a musical. Musicals, generally lighthearted and romantic, do not really go with the theme that is the soul of Sweeney Todd. However, because of this odd pairing between horror and musical, some of the horror is taken away from what ordinarily would be upsetting. To trivialize further its dark themes, the characters are caricatured into people that the viewer does not see as realistic, ones that cannot really be related to. This further separates the audience from the story and makes it okay to enjoy rather than fear.



Playbill cover for *Sweeney Todd*
at Uris Theater 1979
courtesy of PlaybillVault.com

While these unique qualities of each piece are used as devices to disconnect the viewer from the horror, allowing them to laugh, sing along and even share with their children, at what point does the distance from the macabre and the viewer’s enjoyment of it become a thing to be frightened of in itself? The disturbing thing about the detachment between the audience and the content is the possibility that the detachment between the two could grow so great that the audience loses their human compassion for the subjects of the work.

The narrative for my film is taken from the poem *Timmy*, written by my younger sister, Jolie Glickman and edited further by myself. *Timmy* tells the story of a seemingly happy family that hides their immorality from the rest of the world. The story examines the human condition; how good and evil live in everyone and how the divide separating the two is extremely thin. In a nursery rhyme style of poetry, the story deals with adultery, revenge and murder. Since my sister first wrote the poem I was extremely intrigued by it and knew that I wanted to use the poem in a way that emulated some of the creepy things that I love.

The poem uses playful rhymes, which aids in creating a detachment between the audience and the poem’s morbid plot and themes. What I was first reminded of when I read the poem was its likeness to Victorian nursery rhymes, which are often interpreted as having meanings other than what the lyrics literally say. *Ring Around the Rosie* was the rhyme that I first thought of. *Ring Around the Rosie* is often attributed to being about a plague. The rhyme starts with “Ring around the Rosie,” describing the skin pustules from the disease, and the poem ends with “ashes to ashes/ they all fall down” describing the death that came from the plague (Corr, 371). Many other traditional nursery rhymes and fairy tales contain dark stories as well, such as those of The Brothers Grimm. The stories that the brothers Grimm created are now recognized in their “Disney” form. However, when *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rapunzel* were originally written they would not be considered what is child appropriate today. The rhyming in *Timmy* is an homage to these early forms of children’s entertainment, when horror and gore went hand in hand with bed time stories.

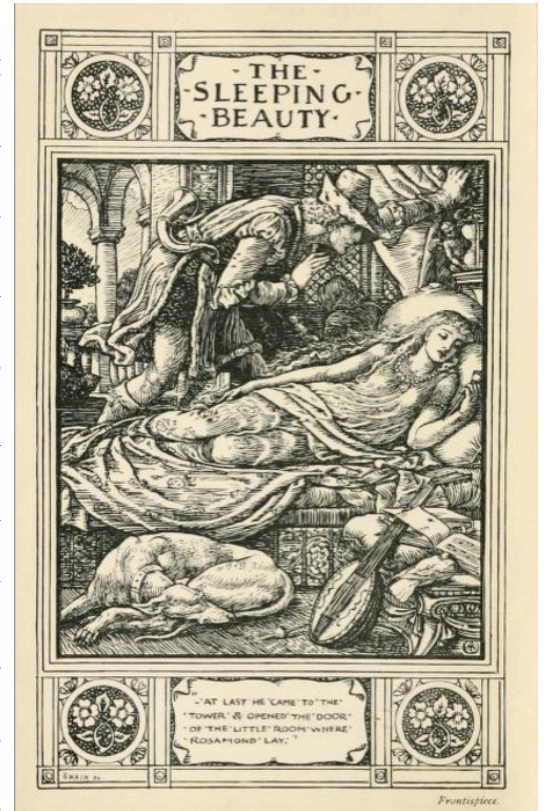


Illustration by Walter Crane from *Household Stories- The Brothers Grimm*



Still from Opening Sequence of *Timmy*

The opening of the film is one of the ways I give the viewer that idea that it is a fairytale. My original plan for the film was to have an animated book opening at the beginning of the film, and the story starting within the book. This technique for beginning a film is a device that is used in many of the first Disney films such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Pinocchio*. However, due to time restrictions I ended up revising that idea since modeling a 3D book in Maya and then animating it would have taken a considerable amount of time. In order to keep the general idea

without all of the fancy technical footwork, I created an opening that lets the audience know that the set and characters are toy miniature paper cut-outs of the real thing. I created a box, which when opened, reveals the house in which the film takes place. A sky backdrop comes down along with a few clouds to really emphasize the theatrics of the set and then the film begins. The playful nature of the size of the set that the audience can see during the opening sequence is another quality that contrasts with the serious nature of the content of the film.

The contradictions between the content and the style of the poem are what inspired the aesthetic style for my film. My illustrations take inspiration from the Victorian Era. The Victorian Era was a period of time where strict codes of moral conduct were enforced. However, despite the surface appearance of a principled people, the Victorian era had a darker side filled with prostitution, child labor and crime. In



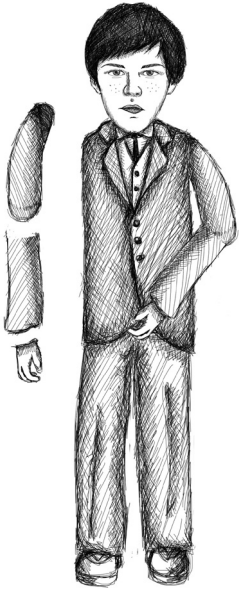
Still from Scene Two of *Timmy*

England during the Victorian era, one 40th of the population, or about fifty-five thousand women, were involved in



Character Sheet for
"Mother" "Father" & "Timmy"

prostitution, but the general crime rate is generally estimated or unknown since the majority of crimes went unrecorded (Jackson). Despite the actual conditions of the Victorian Era, the government liked to boast of their "peace loving citizens [who] slept easily in their beds" (Hurd, 50). The contradictions of the Victorian era provide a good comparison to the poem and will be represented in the characters' clothing and setting. A Victorian style is also fitting for my film because of the works that have inspired me. Edward Gorey's illustrations have a Victorian feel to them and *Sweeney Todd* takes place in Victorian London.



Character Sheet for “Timmy”

In order to combine the storybook concept with my Victorian concept, I have decided to use Adobe After Effects to create a paper doll world for my characters to live in. The three main characters, Timmy, Father and Mother, are drawn in black and white with tight cross hatching, imitating the etching style of illustration that was popular during the Victorian Era. Completely 2D, these characters will move around in three-dimensional space as if their world was a paper dollhouse. The environment, unlike the characters, will be in color and have intricate details and designs, which is a reflection of Victorian textiles, furniture and architecture.

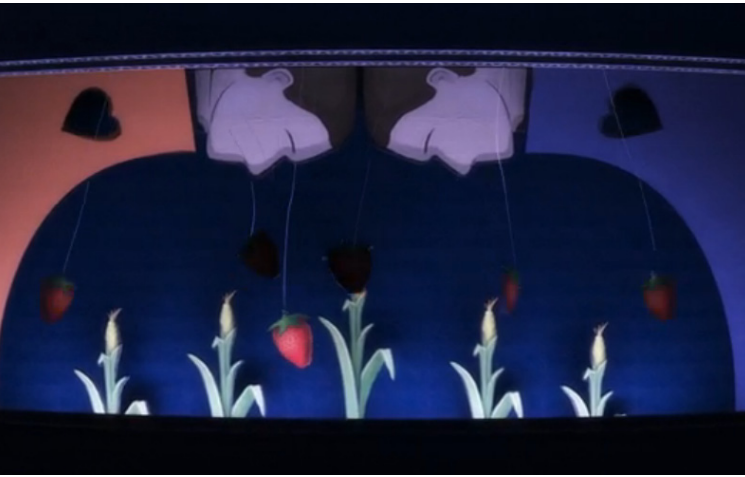
To build the paper-doll-world for Timmy, I drew the objects that will be in the scene in Photoshop. I drew each face of every object independently from the rest of the object as if I were going to cut them out and physically build the characters and props. Once each piece of the object was built, I brought all of the elements together into After Effects and built up the 2D elements into 3D space. By placing the characters and other elements at different depths in the virtual set, I create an illusion of physical 2D elements in an actual 3D space. This style was inspired by Jamie Caliri’s work on the credit sequence for *Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events*. While that piece was done as stop motion, I am using the same concept in order to create the visual aesthetic for my piece.



Stills from Jamie Caliri’s
Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events

The characters will move around the set as if they were puppets or paper dolls with joints that can only move in one direction. I chose this style of animating in order to reflect the dollhouse-world but also as a salute to shadow puppets, a popular form of entertainment during Victorian times. The puppets also lend a creepy quality to the characters in the stiffness of their movements, the flatness of their expressions and the immobility they have inside their world.

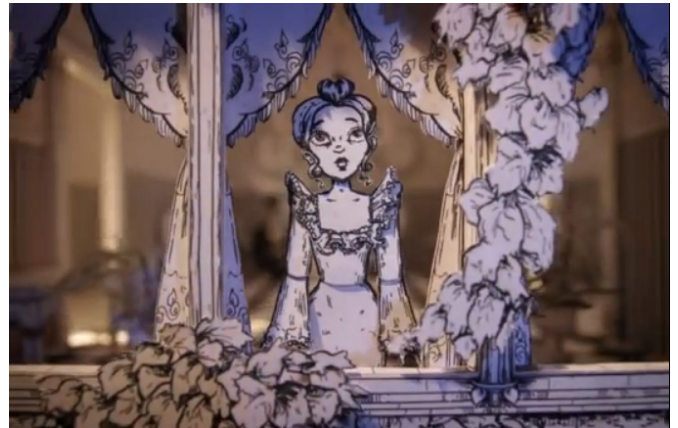
As a reference for how I should go about animating these figures, I have looked at Gabe Askew's fan made music video of Grizzly Bear's song *Two Weeks*. The animation combines both 2D and 3D elements into one set that is pulled by strings, gears and levers. While I originally was having difficulty combining all of my



Still from Dave Askew's *Two Weeks*

elements into a harmonious film, Askew manages to balance everything in a way that makes sense. Using diorama type sets for his elements, he contains and shows the depth that each object fills in the space. I have adopted this technique to balance all of my elements as well, using the set of the dollhouse in the same way that Askew uses his diorama set-up.

Another film that has helped me design the space in which my character's live is *I Have Your Heart* by Crabapple, Boekbinder and Batt. *I Have Your Heart* is a stop motion film using paper cut-outs to tell the romantic yet eerie story of a girl and her heart. While my film is not stop motion, looking at that technique of animation has helped me to better visualize a space that is virtual rather than physical. *I Have Your Heart* and Askew's film have both been crucial in helping me understand the limitations and characteristics of the medium and style that I am exploring.

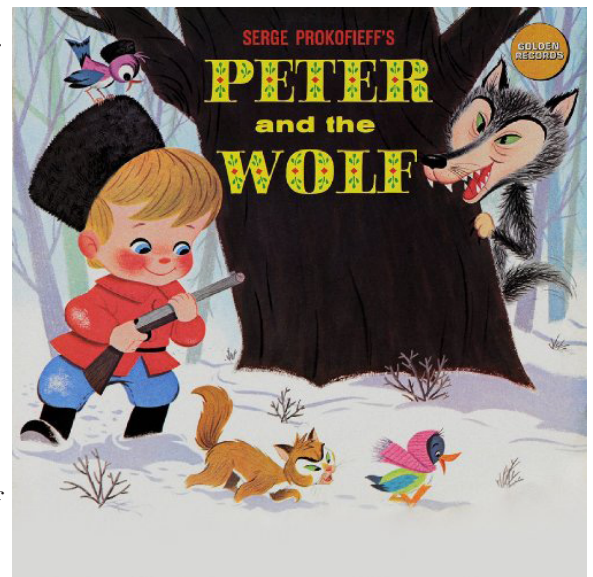


Still from Crabapple's *I Have Your Heart*

Voicing over the animations, a narrator reads the poem. The narrator is voiced by Jonathan West, a local actor in Ann Arbor with a talent for the dramatic and dark. West has a classic, deep narrator tone to him, as if he were a father reading the story to a child at bedtime. Sound effects will add ambience and an environmental atmosphere to the film as well, creating a space that the audience can realistically envision. Simon Alexander-Adams, a Performing Arts Technology student, is working with me in order to create the score and sound-scape for the film. Using different instruments and a method of using the piano to create unusual sounds called extended

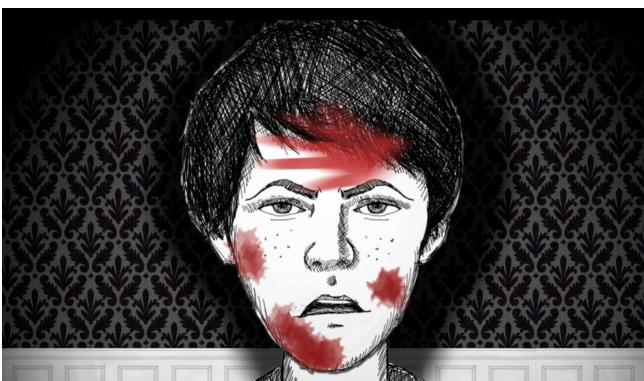
technique. This consists of placing objects on the strings of the piano while the instrument is being played, creating spooky and unusual sounds. The score is a mix of traditional sounds and more unusual ones in order to un-ground the story in any specific time. Despite the Victorian aesthetic to the film, I want the viewer to remember that it is a story that could be read during any time. The score and narration aid in the rising and falling action, as the narration's and score's tempos change based on the drama and mood of the story at any particular moment.

The score is also taking some elements inspired by *Peter and the Wolf*, a composition written by Sergei Prokofiev. The composition combines both a narrator with an orchestra in order to tell the story. *Peter and the Wolf* has the interesting characteristic of using one instrument to represent each character in the story. For *Timmy's* score, I decided to incorporate that same concept. The character of Timmy is represented by the sounds of a music box which also is the most predominant sound throughout the film. Father is represented by a cello and Mother by a piano. As each character plays his or her role, the music that accompanies them goes along with the story. This element of *Peter and the Wolf* also complements my theme of children's stories with a dark twist being that *Peter and the Wolf* embodies that concept extremely well.



Peter & The Wolf Album Cover

The film ends on darkness. All of the elements and inspirations that have become a part of my integrative project give the viewer the reason to ask the question that I started wondering at the beginning of this whole



Still from Scene Eight of *Timmy*

process: is it dangerous to enjoy horror that has been so far removed from oneself? While my film may not answer this question, my hope is that my film may bring attention to the concept and begin to create a discussion based off of the ideas and themes that this thesis has illustrated.

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