I, Alexandre Badue, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Music History.

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Comedy Tomorrow, Tragedy Tonight: Defining the Aesthetics of Tragedy on Broadway

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Comedy Tomorrow, Tragedy Tonight: Defining the Aesthetics of Tragedy on Broadway

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Abstract

This study defines the aesthetics of tragedy in five Broadway musicals: Street Scene, West Side Story, Sweeney Todd, Miss Saigon, and Passion. By examining Aristotle’s observations on Greek tragedy in the Poetics, this study suggests a new approach in interpreting these five musicals’ plots and musical scores. The main discussion considers the protagonist from each musical, their reactions to “outside-the-drama” situations, and their understanding of the consequences of their own actions. Similar to many Greek tragedies and some of Shakespeare’s plays, these five musicals follow Aristotle’s premises for a “complex plot” with hamartia, recognition, and reversal. Aristotle called hamartia the crucial action or deed that marks the protagonist’s journey to an unfortunate end. Reversal occurs later in the story when the protagonist realizes that the opposite of what she or he was intending took place. Recognition marks the protagonist’s understanding that his or her own actions and misjudgments has led to suffering and ruin at the end of the play. A close analysis of these musicals’ protagonists and plots reveals how Aristotle’s definitions of the genre of tragedy appear in the musicals’ songs and underscoring. In addition, this study takes into consideration elements that Aristotle did not discuss in his Poetics, but which contribute to the protagonists’ tragic endings. The subplots, characters who act as Greek chorus, moments of comic relief, heartfelt songs that imply the final tragedy, and the assertion of the characters’ human values at the end of the plot all enhance the three Aristotelian concepts and the protagonist’s tragic saga. The composers of these five musicals employed non-Aristotelian elements in their dramatic songs, whose music and lyrics also receive close analysis.

This thesis contributes to musical theater scholarship by providing new insights into these musicals’ characters, plots, and music, linking them to Aristotle’s Poetics, a fundamental treatise
in Western dramatic criticism. In addition, this study draws parallels between Broadway musical theater and other forms of theater, such as Greek and Shakespearean drama. Since tragedy does not comprise the only element present in these musicals (they all feature comedy as well), directors, performers, and choreographers staging these works might decide to emphasize these musicals’ tragic aspects by taking this study’s conclusions into consideration.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis’s readers, Dr. Jonathan Kregor and Professor Roger Grodsky. The idea for this project originated in Dr. Kregor’s “History of Opera” class in the fall of 2009. His discussion of tragedy in nineteenth-century opera inspired me to link Aristotle’s *Poetics* to another form of musical theater, namely, Broadway musicals. I have been very lucky to be able to write about musicals in a College-Conservatory that offers one of the leading musical theater programs in the United States. This opportunity has allowed me to work with Professor Grodsky, who has been involved in staging and directing musicals. Both readers’ insights and suggestions have greatly contributed to my research.

I also wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Bruce McClung, for his vast knowledge in music history and American music. From informal discussions about a show that we had both seen to detailed classes on Broadway musicals, Dr. McClung guided me through the thesis process with valuable questions, suggestions, and immeasurable support. I could not have completed this project without his assistance with my writing skills. I will be forever thankful to him for his thorough readings of my drafts, with many notes, corrections, and suggestions, not to mention his patience in struggling through occasionally confusing sentences. With English as my second language, I believe I have grown so much as a writer after working with him.

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Introduction

In his article “The Musical Goes Ironic: The Evolution of Genres,” Richard Hasbany offers the following definition of genre: “A genre is composed of a number of works sufficiently similar in narrative structure, themes, character types, décor, and iconography to be recognized and given a label . . . in a given culture.”\(^1\) Without question, Broadway musical theater has developed since the nineteenth century in a way that it has been able to comprise a “number of works” that share many elements. When creating a musical, the creators (librettist, composer, and lyricist) employ these elements, allowing them to place their works within this genre. As a result, Broadway musical theater has created some conventions and expanded them throughout its development in the twentieth century. Some of these creators have been able to produce shows that stand out in the history of Broadway musical theater because of the way they manipulated the conventions. *Hair* (1967) expanded the genre by presenting a rock score, a twisted and chaotic plot, and themes that did not pertain to previous musical theater plays.

Other creators have expanded the genre by not allowing their musicals to have a “happy ending.” Instead, tragic characters suffer throughout the story until they die (or see someone they love die) just before the curtain falls. In this study, I maintain that the protagonists of five Broadway musicals can be interpreted as tragic characters. They include Mrs. Maurrant from *Street Scene* (1947), Tony and Maria from *West Side Story* (1957), Sweeney Todd from *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), Kim from *Miss Saigon* (1989), and Giorgio

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from *Passion* (1994). I demonstrate that the genre of tragedy offers a new perspective with which to understand these protagonists’ dramatic trajectory. In addition, because these musicals did not entirely break with convention, some comic (or at least non-tragic) aspects will not be dismissed, but instead investigated for how they provide a foil for the tragic characters’ final downfall.

Regardless if the creators termed these musicals tragedies or not, I identify elements that these tragic characters share with the heroes and heroines from both ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. I propose two methods for analyzing the protagonists of those musicals as tragic characters. First, I employ the theory of the tragic plot from Aristotle (384–322 BCE) as found in his *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE). Second, I consider dramatic elements not investigated in depth in Aristotle’s treatise that contribute to the protagonists’ tragic endings. For both approaches, I consider not only dramatic aspects, but also musical ones, relating elements of the Aristotelian tragic plot to both songs and underscoring.

**1. Defining Tragedy**

Scholars have surmised that Aristotle’s *Poetics* comprises his notes for lectures at the Lyceum in Athens. Aristotle defines the elements of tragedy through an analysis of contemporary drama. He does not establish rules to produce effective tragic plots, but defines what he believes should work if a play in this genre is to succeed. Theater historians regard his treatise to be one of the first writings to consider tragedy and have argued that it has influenced many theories of the genre in subsequent generations. As a result, Aristotle’s treatise includes

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2 Kurt Weill subtitled *Street Scene* a “dramatic musical in 1947, but changed it to “American Opera” when he prepared the piano-vocal score; Bernstein termed *West Side Story* a musical; Stephen Sondheim subtitled *Sweeney Todd* a “Musical Thriller”; Schönberg and Boublil termed *Miss Saigon* a musical; and Sondheim and Lapine labeled *Passion* “A New Musical.”

3 Some of the authors who have been influenced by Aristotle’s *Poetics* include Girolamo Mei (*De modis*, c.1570), Philip Sidney (*A Defence of Poetry*, 1595), Thomas Rymer (*Tragedies of the Last Age Considered*, 1678),
many defining characteristics of tragedy. For example, Aristotle proposed the idea that the chorus’ interaction with an actor formed the protagonist of a performance—not just the chorus alone—and that the treatment of tragedy as a “vehicle for heroic narrative in general” superseded the rituals or worship to Dionysius. In addition, with this treatise, Aristotle counteracted Plato’s ambivalent view of the genre and raised it as the superior form of poetry (drama).

Aristotle traced the genre’s developments that had occurred during the previous two hundred years. Regarding drama in the sixth century, Aristotle was aware of Thespis’ performances. Gerald Else in *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* quotes the philosopher Themistius who claimed, “Aristotle says that at first the chorus as it came in used to sing to the gods, but Thespis invented a prologue and a (set) speech.” These became the spoken lines that Thespis added to the genre. Aristotle was one of the few writers in antiquity who noted this fact, providing what would become the standard view of Thespis’ contribution to the development of the genre. Aristotle theorized about tragedies that had been performed since the fifth century, which implies that he was aware of theatrical productions of his own time. The plays that Aristotle used to amplify his theory include the three major tragedians of the fifth century: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Although Aristotle did not confine himself to these playwrights, he was interested in recording the contributions that these three tragedians had

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5 Ibid., 23.

6 Ibid., 53.

7 If by doing so, Thespis created a new genre or made improvements to an existing one is an argument that I do not consider.
made to the genre. Aristotle’s main aim was to define elements that unified plays and epic poems from the previous two hundred years under the rubric of “tragedy.”

According to Aristotle, “Tragedy is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.” In order for such imitation to happen onstage, a dramatic work must feature six modes of representation: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. For this study, the formulation of what constitutes tragedy includes Aristotle’s discussion of plot, character, and thought only. His treatment of diction includes examples in Greek, a language not applicable for Broadway musical theater. Also, Aristotle spends very little time discussing spectacle. Musical theater often relies on spectacle, but I believe it is primarily for commercial purposes of “the event” rather than “the work.” Furthermore, I am not regarding Aristotle’s writing on melody (melos). It is evident that Greek tragedies interpolated song and dance, but because we do not know exactly where these occurred or what this music sounded like, melos does not appear to be applicable.

According to Aristotle’s theory of plot, character, and thought, tragedy concerns the story of a character who is initially at peace, not suspecting that s/he is able to affect the moral order in any way. Then, conflict develops. An extreme circumstance results from beyond the hero or heroine’s domain, which in most cases occurs before the moment where the play begins and is referred to at some point in the plot. This agent reacts to this circumstance, performing an action or deed whose outcomes make him or her suffer (Aristotle termed it hamartia). With this action, the character strives for happiness. The immediate consequences of this action, however, bring some suffering as the character realizes that the unexpected or opposite of what s/he intended has

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8 Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b. For the source of the translation, see n. 11.

happened. Aristotle labels these moments as recognition and reversal. With such a turn of events, the character learns too late to stop or cease whatever she or he has been striving for, and bad luck terminates the action.

In all other storytelling genres—comedy, farce, tragicomedy—a character learns, grows, and reaches a new point of understanding, one s/he did not expect to fulfill at the beginning of the play. In contrast, tragic plots include suffering and a final confrontation with bad luck. A comic character may see himself trapped in a situation that increasingly becomes impossible for him to resolve, but everything is dealt humorously and without painful suffering. Unexpected events lead to good luck when misunderstandings are explained and mistaken identities are revealed.\textsuperscript{10} In tragedy, however, bad luck brings forth additional suffering. In the \textit{Poetics} chapter 11, Aristotle determines what the final misery may entail: “a destructive or painful action, such as visible deaths, torments, wounding, and other things of the same kind.”\textsuperscript{11}

\section{2. Literature Review}

I have employed Stephen Halliwell’s translation of Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics} for this study.\textsuperscript{12} In the introduction to his translation, Halliwell affirms that Aristotle’s work should not be used “as a stock of renewable but isolated principles.”\textsuperscript{13} He believes that one who applies this treatise to

\begin{itemize}
\item Pseudolus in Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove, and Larry Gelbart’s \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} (based on the comedies of ancient Roman playwright Plautus) provides a representative example.
\item \textit{Poetics} 1452b.
\item Ibid., 28.
\end{itemize}
modern works misreads the original concepts. He suggests instead that one can consider principles from Aristotle’s discussion because they are still “of relevance to criticism,”\(^\text{14}\) neither forgetting nor dismissing that the Poetics comes from and refers to ancient times. Moreover, Halliwell comments, “the critical concepts which [Aristotle] uses, and the judgments which he bases on them, do give us a valuable way of testing and refining our own appreciation of extant Greek Tragedy.”\(^\text{15}\) Applied to another form of theater, Aristotle’s principles provide similar ways of assessing and judging aspects of tragedy on Broadway. Therefore, with Aristotle’s Poetics as a starting point, this study takes Halliwell’s caveats into consideration.

In her article “The Elements of Tragedy,” Elizabeth Belfiore presents an interpretation of Aristotle’s theory that I have found helpful for my study. On reversal, she writes, “The action of an agent of a dramatic action is prevented from achieving its intended result and instead arrives at an opposite actual result.”\(^\text{16}\) In Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus, the messenger’s information about Oedipus’ past changes the king’s agenda of finding his predecessor’s murderer. A reversal occurs when Oedipus learns that he is the murderer himself, must now be punished, and will not see his people freed from the plague. On recognition, Belfiore writes that Aristotle proposes three types: recognition of objects, deeds, and people. The last one, according to her, “leads to good or bad fortune.”\(^\text{17}\) She believes that such recognition “must be an actual event arousing pity and fear and affecting the movement of the dramatic action between good and bad fortune.”\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 2.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 635.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
Oedipus’s recognition of himself as the murderer and that King Laius and Queen Jocasta are his real parents culminate in his final anguish. Belfiore quotes Aristotle himself to demonstrate the elements of a tragic plot. She writes that he maintained that plots should imitate real life by presenting a series of events and actions that are “serious, complete, and [have] magnitude.” 19 She argues that only then can a tragic plot feature “a complication and solution.” 20 My analyses of five Broadway musicals’ plots investigate how complication develops with the protagonists’ recognition and reversal, and how bad luck concludes their journey. Belfiore’s writing calls attention to crucial moments in the Aristotelian plot, and this study explores the music that accompanies them.

Scott McMillin refers to Aristotle very briefly in his monograph *The Musical as Drama*. He claims that musical theater shares with Greek tragedy the interruption of the book by songs and dances. 21 McMillin refutes the musical theater trope that post-1940 Broadway musical theater “integrates” spoken dialogue, songs, and dance. For McMillin, when characters find themselves performing one of these elements, the others are discontinued. Integration—when these elements occur simultaneously—rarely happens in musical theater. 22 McMillin claims that songs depict or illustrate what has already been stated or mentioned in the book, during spoken dialogue. McMillin’s observation proves useful for my investigation. For reversal moments in musicals, I discuss the importance a song acquires in these scenes. The following questions contribute to my interpretation: “Is the character singing about this reversal?,” “If not, then

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19 Ibid., 629.

20 Ibid.


22 Among other examples, McMillin argues that integration occurs in the song “A Weekend in the Country” from Sondheim and Wheeler’s *A Little Night Music*. 
why?,” “Is s/he singing about something already mentioned in the book or is s/he singing something new, some new information or realization about his or her state of mind?” I draw on the literature of scholars of both Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the American musical theater.

3. Methodology

I have analyzed the protagonists from these five Broadway musicals using Aristotle’s *Poetics* and his discussion of tragedy. I have not employed or applied his theory as a whole, presupposing his ideas are unquestionable, and thus, present in all tragedies. Aristotle’s treatise has been analyzed over many centuries; dramaturges have employed it since the Middle Ages, and different minds, in different times and in different countries, have provided different interpretations. William Shakespeare’s tragedies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and Jean Racine’s and Pierre Corneille’s tragic plays in France during the seventeenth century provided new paradigms of the genre. Indeed, my study is centuries apart from Aristotle’s work, and I have not dismissed other theories of tragedy. I have considered selected concepts (*hamartia*, recognition, and reversal) from his treatise and investigated how they appear in the musicals’ book (in the characters’ spoken lines) and music (primarily in songs and underscoring). In his translation of the *Poetics*, Halliwell refers to these concepts as “fundamental issues which are still of relevance to criticism.”

The criteria for interpreting those protagonists as tragic characters can be found in Aristotle’s conception of plot and character, elements that constitute his prime concern in the *Poetics*. As far as characters are concerned, Aristotle considers their misjudgments, mistakes, or errors in addition to their good intentions. Aristotle calls this *hamartia*: something done in

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ignorance whose outcomes are not what the agents intended (e.g., Oedipus’ insistence in finding Laius’ murderer). From the plot, three Aristotelian qualities appear: recognition of a specific situation, making the main character discover his or someone else’s identity or true character (e.g., Oedipus realizes the man he once killed was Laius, and Jocasta is his mother); reversal of the plot, a turning point as a consequence of that awareness (e.g., Oedipus tried to avoid the oracle’s prophecy, but understands that he was unsuccessful); and how tragedy imitates serious actions, which become increasingly complicated throughout the play and eventually lead to a resolution (all these references to Sophocles’ plot for Oedipus Tyrannus represent complication and denouement).

These Broadway musicals feature some tragic elements that Aristotle did not include in his discussion. In the Golden Age of Greek drama, the main character, or hero, did not sing, and the chorus sang about the action on stage and the hero’s thoughts and deeds. Still today when referring to characters who comment on the story from an outsider perspective, whether they sing or not, we say they provide the same function as a Greek chorus. Because Aristotle discusses the chorus’s role only briefly, it appears in this study in another section, separated from the Poetics. In that section, I also consider moments of relief in the middle of the tragic plot and some songs whose lyrics and musical elements seem naïve, but which actually mask the character’s true intentions. The Poetics primarily concerns the play’s main character and marks the end of the drama with this character’s death. Thus, a discussion of how subplots contribute to the tragedy and an investigation of post-tragedy events extend beyond Aristotle’s theories.

In the first chapter, I consider hamartia in the five selected Broadway musicals. I identify aspects that make the tragic characters both pure and not so virtuous at the same time, specify their hamartia moments, and investigate how the concept appears in both underscoring and
songs. In the second chapter, I explore the characters’ reversal and recognition, demonstrating that these musicals’ storylines feature what Aristotle termed “complex plot,” with complication and denouement. I explore dramatic and musical traits present not only in the tragic characters’ reversal and recognition moments, but also in their final bad luck and its ruinous implications. In chapter three, I consider elements that enhance the Aristotelian model of the tragic agenda, but which he did not discuss: the subplots, choruses, songs that provide a foil for tragic elements, moments of relief from the main plot, and a final assertion of human values after the tragedy has occurred. I also explore how these elements appear in some of the musicals’ main songs.

Because Aristotle’s theory serves as the basis for most of this study, I use tragic Greek plays as paragons of the genre. When explaining in depth the concepts introduced above, I explore how they appear in the plays of renowned Greek tragedians before applying them to the selected five musicals. I include examples from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*; Sophocles’ *Antigone, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Trachiniae*; and Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and *Medea*. I also refer to Shakespeare’s tragedies to the extent that they fit Aristotle’s paradigm and share elements with Greek drama.\(^{24}\) I will cite parts of *Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet*, and *Titus Andronicus*.

This study does not include an investigation of the so-called Aristotelian “unities” in the five selected musicals. Sixteenth-century Italian scholars, after restoring and reading Aristotle’s *Poetics*, did not consider the treatise a descriptive form of dramatic criticism, but as a prescriptive assessment that had to be followed if one intended to write a successful tragedy. Humanist playwrights such as Giangiorgio Trissino (1478–1550), Sperone Speroni (1500–1588), and Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio (1504–1573) advocated that tragic plays must contain unity of

\(^{24}\) Whether Shakespeare read Aristotle’s *Poetics* forms another discussion, one that has been a part of Shakespearian scholarship for centuries, and I do not intend to weigh in on this matter. Also, I will not include tragic elements that belong exclusively to Shakespearean plays.
action (the plot must include no subplots), unity of place (the story must occur in one locale only), and unity of time (the action must occur in twenty-four hours or less). These “Aristotelian unities” became such important “rules” in western theater (especially in Italy and France) that tragedies (either spoken plays or operas) followed them for the next four hundred years. However, in his observations of Greek tragedy, Aristotle simply wrote that compared to epic poetry, tragedy tends to present a single action, in one locale only, and tries “as hard as it can to exist during a single daylight period, or to vary but little.”

25 As Stephen Halliwell puts it, “[the Three Unities form] the classic case of a literary principle speciously foisted upon the Poetics (and therefore a pointed reminder of how little the treatise was actually read, as opposed to being simply appealed to, even in the most self-consciously neo-classical circles).”

26 Although they were relevant for tragedians after the Italian Renaissance, these three unities were not fundamental to Aristotle’s aesthetics for tragedy. Therefore, I do not include them in the present discussion.

To conclude, after having identified Aristotle’s concepts in the plots and songs from the five selected Broadway musicals and after investigating elements that the musicals share but are not present in the Poetics, aspects from the genre of tragedy will provide new ways to interpret the protagonists from those musicals and their sagas.

25 Aristotle Poetics 1449b.


27 Nor were they part of English tragedy aesthetics in the sixteenth century. Tragedies by Shakespeare and Marlowe do not take them into account.

28 Tragedy may be just one way of interpreting a work. A director may choose to highlight the tragic side of a story over other elements for a production or “event.” But for this thesis, I follow Aristotle’s lead that the characters are led to bad luck; therefore, the shows feature elements of tragedy, at least in the Classical Greek sense. Moreover, I study them through the texts of the original production: script, piano vocal score, and orchestral parts—not through the process of revival or “revisal.”
4. Background on the Five Selected Broadway Musicals

The first musical considered for this study is Elmer Rice, Kurt Weill, and Langston Hughes’s *Street Scene* (1947). Playwright Elmer Rice’s 1929 play of the same title dramatizes a housewife, Anna Maurrant, who has an affair with the milk collector and is caught in his arms by her murderous husband. Rice directed the play himself, which opened at New York City’s Playhouse and won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Many composers considered turning Rice’s play into an opera, but the playwright did not acquiesce until 1946, when Kurt Weill proposed such an adaptation. Rice himself adapted the play for the musical, and Langston Hughes joined the creative team as lyricist. *Street Scene* opened on Broadway at the Adelphi Theater on January 9, 1947. The hybrid nature of the show has resulted in a number of generic labels. In 1947, it was subtitled a “dramatic musical,” but when preparing the piano-vocal score for publication, Weill subtitled it an “American opera.” Since his arrival in the United States in 1935, Weill, who was German by birth, had dreamed of an American genre of opera. He concluded it would have to be born on Broadway, since “it represents the living theater in this country,” and it would mingle operatic features with those more common to the Broadway stage. With *Street Scene*, he saw the chance of bringing his idea to fruition, and as a result the work contains musical numbers that range from jitterbug to full-blown arias. Weill wrote to stage director Rouben Mamoulian in 1946 that the show would have songs, “and by ‘song’ I mean arias, duets, trios and all forms of musical ensembles, and some real songs too.”

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musical portions as numbers, unless when the composer specifies a particular ensemble, such as a trio or sextet.

Street Scene was not the only work by Weill that featured tragic elements. His Lost in the Stars (with book and lyrics by Maxwell Anderson) was billed on Broadway as a “musical tragedy” in 1949. I decided not to include Lost in the Stars in my study because I am interested in investigating musicals from different decades of the twentieth century, and both Street Scene and Lost in the Stars date from the 1940s. I chose the former over the latter because Weill wrote the music for the Lost in the Stars with the genre of tragedy in mind. As Foster Hirsch wrote, “For Weill, composing a musical tragedy offered both a radical change of pace from Love Life and a set of challenges that were to be unique in his Broadway career.”31 Having termed Street Scene an “American opera,” Weill may not have considered Mrs. Maurrant and the music he composed for her character to be within the genre of tragedy. With this study, I demonstrate that even before Stephen Kumalo in Lost in the Stars, Weill successfully musicalized the saga of a tragic character, one that does not dominate the story, but appears amongst several other plots.

The second musical considered here, West Side Story, premiered on Broadway ten years later than Street Scene, on September 26, 1957. The creators included Jerome Robbins as choreographer and director, Leonard Bernstein as composer, Arthur Laurents as book writer, and Stephen Sondheim as lyricist. Robbins proposed the original idea of setting Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in New York City of the 1950s. The creative team initially contemplated the idea of a Jewish-Catholic conflict to replace the original’s Montague-Capulet enmity. Later in the production process, they decided to make the show about rival New York gangs. Puerto Rican immigrants (the Sharks) would battle against the native-born Americans (the Jets), and a

31 Ibid., 302.
girl from the former group and a boy from the latter would fall in love. Gang fighting in the streets of New York City was not totally unheard of in 1957. As Elizabeth Wells documents, “between the late 1940s and the opening of West Side Story in 1957, youth crime had doubled. Delinquency had of course always existed . . . but postwar Americans had never experienced this problem on such a large scale.32

Laurents’s adaptation and Bernstein’s score certainly contributed to the musical’s success; however, Robbins’s choreography broke new ground. West Side Story features moments in which the story is told just through dance: the opening fight, the dance at the Gym, and the rumble toward the end of the first act. Moreover, it presents a ballet in the “Somewhere” sequence, Latin dance in “America,” and modern dance combined with street dance to depict the Jet’s anxiety and desperation in “Cool” and “Gee, Officer Krupke.” As scholar Irene Dash discusses in Shakespeare and the Broadway Musical, dance is West Side Story’s main expression, as language is Romeo and Juliet’s.33 Dance actually functions as tragedy since Robbins’s choreography depicts the hostility between the gangs, the primary cause of Tony and Maria’s final tragedy.34

Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s Sweeney Todd comprises the third musical in this study. The idea of the musical originated with the composer himself, after he attended a performance of Christopher Bond’s play of the same name in London in 1973. The “musical


33 Irene G. Dash, Shakespeare and the American Musical (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 113.

thriller,” about a barber who returns to London to seek revenge against the man who falsely accused him of a crime and sentenced him to prison in Australia, features a book by Hugh Wheeler based on Bond’s script. Harold Prince directed the original production, which opened at the Uris Theater (now the Gershwin Theater) on March 1, 1979. The tale of the demon barber of Fleet Street dates from the nineteenth century and many other adaptations had been made from the original serialized novel before Bond’s. But his was the one that attracted Sondheim first because Bond added the Judge and his wicked deeds, which make Todd’s virulent acts understandable. Second, because Sondheim had enjoyed the Grand Guignol and melodramatic aspects of this performance, he made sure they would be included in his musical version. Aspects such as one-dimensional characters (Johanna is always good, the Judge is always evil), coincidences (Anthony passes by Johanna’s window and sees the young woman who happens to be Todd’s daughter), and exaggeration (the Beggar Woman’s madness, lunatics on the loose, and cannibalism) all make the work melodramatic. However, these characteristics do not prevent the melodrama from acquiring a tragic agenda. Put another way, Street Scene too features melodramatic elements but is still a tragedy. By the same token, Gilbert and Sullivan’s Ruddigore features many melodrama traits but it remains a comedy. With the inclusion of Sweeney Todd in this discussion, I do not intend to question Sondheim’s reference to the musical as a melodrama. Rather, I contend that this does not preclude employing the aesthetics of tragedy to analyze the musical.

Miss Saigon comprises the fourth musical in this study. With music by Frenchman Claude-Michel Schönberg, lyrics by Alain Boublil, and English lyrics by Richard Maltby Jr., the musical first opened in London on September 20, 1989. British producer Cameron Mackintosh,

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who had brought *Cats, Les Misérables*, and *The Phantom of the Opera* to Broadway, was responsible for *Miss Saigon*’s subsequent transfer to the Broadway Theater on April 11, 1991. Even if *Miss Saigon* is not an American musical, nevertheless enjoyed an extended run on Broadway and closed on January 28, 2001. Therefore, for the purposes of this study I consider this West End musical as part of the Broadway musical theater canon. *Miss Saigon*’s story presumably happened in Japan in the early 1890s, a period when this country had been trading with the West for approximately forty years. The original “Butterfly” apparently married a British merchant and her suicide attempt failed. The fictional story fits what Edward Said termed “Orientalism,” having been written by Westerners who constructed the exotic “other” through a collection of stereotypes. The American John Luther Long, whose sister is credited to have known the real Butterfly’s grown child in Nagasaki, wrote a short story titled *Madame Butterfly* in 1898. It concerned a love affair between a Japanese geisha with an American lieutenant. American playwright David Belasco first dramatized Long’s short story in 1900, keeping Long’s title, but making Cio-Cio-San succeed in her suicide, and Lieutenant Pinkerton grieve over her body. Giacomo Puccini saw Belasco’s play in London and, having admired the plot, decided to create an operatic version. His *Madama Butterfly* premiered in Milan on February 17, 1904 and is loosely based on Long’s and Belasco’s accounts. Puccini together with his two librettists, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, created some of the incidents depicted in the opera’s plot. Subsequently, *Miss Saigon*’s creators based their version on Puccini’s opera, but with the setting updated to the 1970s during the Vietnam War. The main character is no longer a geisha, but Kim, a prostitute-dancer in a Saigon nightclub. Lieutenant Pinkerton became Chris, a soldier in the U.S. Army. The musical remains to date the only rendition of the story in which the

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American, after marrying another woman, returns to the East to help his former lover, aware that she has borne him a son. In the others, he returns to fulfill his duties to the army.

The fifth musical included in this study is *Passion*, based on the 1971 novel *Fosca* by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, which formed the basis for the film *Passione d’Amore* in 1981 by Ettore Scola. Like *Sweeney Todd*, the original idea for *Passion* was Sondheim’s. He wrote both the music and lyrics, and director James Lapine provided the book. The musical opened on Broadway at the Plymouth Theater (now the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater) on May 9, 1994. The story is set in 1863 and concerns an Italian Captain, Giorgio Bachetti, who has an affair with a married woman named Clara. He is sent to an outpost outside Milan, where he meets Fosca, the cousin of one of his superiors. Some unknown disease has left Fosca ill with a weak body. She falls in love with Giorgio and desperately pursues his love in return. The musical explores several topics including beauty, health, judgment, power, and love. During Giorgio’s saga, he learns that Clara’s love is not what he hoped and that Fosca’s devotion is genuine even though she remains physically repulsive. The musical’s characteristics include an epistolary development, with much of the information about these characters delivered as someone reads a letter; a one-act structure with no intermission; and, although the creators alternate between spoken dialogue and songs, a richly intricate score that swiftly links sung words to spoken ones and moves the action forward, allowing no break for applause.

Examining these five musicals through the aesthetics of tragedy allows different and new interpretations of these musicals’ plots, characters, and songs. Actors, directors, choreographers, and music directors can consider the perspective of tragedy when producing these musicals. Scholar Wayne Booth’s statement that “The end of poetics for the poet is to improve in making
well; the end of poetics for the critic is to improve in judging makings – and perhaps to assist the poet to create better makings,”

explains why I have employed it as the foundation of my study.

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Chapter One

Tragedy at Hand: *Hamartia* as a First Step Toward Tragedy

You may have eyes, but you cannot see your danger, where you’re living, who you’re living with. . . . Now you see clearly, but then you will see darkness.

—Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*

In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the hero tries to find King Laius’ murderer so that he can save Thebes from a terrible plague. Oedipus believes he is taking the right action, one that is beneficial for both his reign and his people. However, not until the play’s last scenes does he realize that the man he had killed some years back on his way to Thebes was actually the king. Thus, Sophocles’ hero meets his final tragedy as he blinds himself and departs from Thebes forever. Oedipus looks back on his own life and understands that it was his own actions that led him to a disastrous ending, despite his good intentions. His firm resolution to find the king’s murderer marks Oedipus’ first step toward tragedy—one that he is entirely unaware of making. This protagonist’s first move delineates what Aristotle terms *hamartia* in his *Poetics*.¹

In the opinion of Greek drama scholars, *hamartia* “has a range of applications, from “ignorance of fact” at one end to “moral defect” and “moral error” at the other. To refer to this device as simply “mistake of fact” “restricts Aristotle’s meaning in a way he did not intend, and

¹ Aristotle *Poetics* 1453a.
does less than justice to his analysis of classical drama.”

2 Hamartia thus results from the protagonist’s misjudgments, but most importantly, implies an activity, since “it is in [the character’s] actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness.”

3 Consequently, hamartia generates a crucial moment in the protagonist’s saga. In comedy, this moment contributes to good luck, whereas in tragedy, this moment leads to the main character’s downfall.

Scholar Stephen Halliwell claims that Aristotle did not give this term the same structural role and important definition as he did for recognition and reversal. For that reason, we cannot “deduce from the uses of the term . . . at what point or points in the play, or by what mechanisms, hamartia is to function.”

4 Because it has no definite meaning, translation is virtually impossible. For this study, I have retained the original Greek for the term. I employ it subjectively, emphasizing what it represents in the storytelling rather than defining what it is per se. Thus, I sidestep the quagmire of which word in English might be the best translation (error, fallibility, flaw, frailty, mistake) and instead concentrate on the attributes that produce the tragic character’s suffering.

In this context, hamartia represents an action, a deed, or an effort that culminates in an agonizing experience. It need not be a single action. In some cases, numerous acts may represent hamartia. In this instance, I will employ the plural of hamartia: hamartiai. Moreover, such actions, deeds, or efforts may be thought or enacted. In some cases, the tragic character first thinks and later acts. When it involves thinking, the act comes from a decision or a choice. Both the decision and the act itself constitute hamartia. In addition, the audience may witnesses the


3 Poetics 1450a.

hamartia action during the performance, or it may occur offstage before the beginning of the play (and the character references it during the play so that we learn something about his or her past).

The protagonist’s response to another incident produces the hamartia action or effort. Aristotle in the Poetics contradicts himself in his discussion of the tragic character’s relationship to external events. In Chapter 7, he writes that the main action in tragedy “does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event.”5 But in Chapter 18, he characterizes tragedy according to such a relationship. This inconsistency notwithstanding, Aristotle must have been aware that a play (and its characters) has a background, and Greek dramaturges used this device of past circumstances and/or events in the protagonist’s life in order to launch the plot. Scholar Deborah H. Roberts concludes that Aristotle’s comments on these actions “outside the drama” do not form a theory: “tragedy must frequently refer to earlier or later events without staging them, and some of these events are crucial to the plot. The tragedians exploit this generic constraints as they do others, developing their relationship of staged drama to larger myth in a variety of ways.”6

Returning to Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus, the protagonist believes that Polybus and Merope are his real parents. When he hears from the oracle that he would marry with his mother and kill his father with his own hands, Oedipus decides to leave Corinth, believing he can escape the oracle’s prophecy. Only after that decision does he begin his hamartiai (he kills King Laius unaware that he is his father, marries Jocasta unaware that she is his mother). All these events precede the beginning of the play, and a Greek audience would have been familiar with them

5 Aristotle Poetics 1450b.

since these characters were from Greek history or mythology. The tragedy begins with Oedipus vowing to discover the real murderer of the king, unaware that it is himself.

Tragic characters may bear no responsibility for the initial situation that results from events outside the drama. Instead, they are either part of an oracle’s prophecy (like Oedipus) or victims of somebody else’s deeds. Hippolytus, Thesus, and Phaedra react the way they do in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* because Aphrodite decided to take revenge on Hippolytus’ devotion to Artemis and his rejection of her. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the young prince’s misfortunes and indecisions result from his uncle Claudius’ mischievousness. Having realized such fatality in their lives, the protagonists enact *hamartia* as they try to avoid it.

In this chapter, I identify in the five works of musical theater under discussion those moments that initiate the “change from prosperity to affliction”\(^7\)—Aristotle’s ideal for a tragedy. I consider all *hamartia* attributes discussed above relating them to “outside-the-drama” events, especially those antedating the beginning of the work. This analysis primarily investigates the action, deed, or effort that causes suffering. The pain itself belongs to the tragic character’s recognition and will be considered in the following chapter. First, I discuss the tragic characters who commit *hamartia* in each of the five musicals, followed by how their *hamartiai* produce different types of tragic plots. The second half of this chapter considers the songs the characters sing at or after the *hamartia* moment.

\(^7\) Aristotle *Poetics* 1453a.
1. **Hamartia and Characterization**

Before analyzing the tragic characters’ actions and discussing how they enact *hamartia* according to the theory explained above, I begin with a survey of these characters’ features, following Aristotle’s description of the tragic hero. In the first two chapters of this thesis, I include only the protagonists, characters who parallel Greek tragedy’s “heroes.” I investigate aspects of these characters’ personalities and actions. A discussion of other important characters who also somehow relate to the protagonist’s final tragedy (such as Rose and Sam in *Street Scene* or Anita in *West Side Story*) appear in the third chapter.⁸

In his theorization of tragedy, Aristotle writes that the character who enacts what he calls *hamartia* has to be moderately good.⁹ Tragedy demands characters who exert themselves to obtain good fortune, but ultimately fail. Because these characters are not extremely virtuous, it is easier for the audience to understand and sometimes forgive their wrongdoing.

*Street Scene*’s Anna Maurrant provides a textbook example of Aristotle’s theory. At the outset, playwright Elmer Rice presents her as a devoted mother and dutiful wife. Maybe she acts a little submissive, such as when her young son, Willie, asks her for a dime. But she knows her duties a mother (she cares for the way her children behave and dress). She prepares dinner for her husband, who returns home after a long day of work and does not show appreciation for her efforts. As the first act develops, we learn that she used to enjoy reading, but has “got out of the habit,”¹⁰ and that she formerly enjoyed dancing. In addition, she helps Mrs. Buchanan deliver her

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⁸ I have made such a distinction because Aristotle’s discussion includes only the protagonist (there are no subplots in Greek tragedy), and I believe the protagonists of the five musicals under investigation provide enough attributes that lead to their own downfall.

⁹ *Poetics* 1452b.

baby and subsequently cooks soup for her. She also consoles Mrs. Hildebrand, upon her eviction, singing that, “a brighter day is coming.” However, adultery displays her weak side. Twice in the first act she lies to Mr. Maurrant about Mr. Sankey, the milk collector with whom she is having an affair. When she goes after Mr. Sankey, subsequent to his first appearance onstage, she tells her husband she went looking for Willie in the street. And after Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey dance in “Wrapped in Ribbon and Tied in a Bow,” she manages to hide her acquaintanceship with the milk collector by telling Mr. Maurrant he is just a man who “lives down the block somewhere.” Moreover, as soon as Mr. Maurrant and the children leave the house early in the morning, she invites Mr. Sankey up to the apartment. Anna Maurrant fits the definition of a complex tragic character: an exemplary housewife, mother, and neighbor, but also one who reacts to the dreariness of life’s misfortunes in a socially unacceptable way.

In *West Side Story*, Tony and Maria are both tragic characters, precisely like in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Laurents and Sondheim link the characters with the word “something.” Tony sings that he can feel “Something’s Coming,” and Maria tells Anita in their first scene that she expects “something” will happen when she meets the one she loves. Of these five musicals, only *West Side Story* includes two tragic characters. Librettist Arthur Laurents introduces Tony as a founder of the Jets. Through the gang members’ dialogue, we learn that Tony, although still revered, has been acting in a way that distances him from defending the Jet’s turf. Later, he tells Riff—a friend to whom he still feels somehow connected—that he does not care for fights and belonging to a gang anymore. Finally, in his song “Something’s Coming,” he welcomes this as something good and new, which he predicts will come along: “Come on,

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11 Ibid., 29.
12 Ibid., 31.
something, come on in, don’t be shy, meet a guy, pull up a chair!,”

he sings. Even if he does not know what this something might be, he knows “it’s gonna be great.”
The song clearly shows he has good intentions and strives for connection. These two first scenes also depict the weaknesses in his character. The Jets mention that Tony helped them in fighting another gang. In addition, Riff says he thought he knew Tony’s character and is impressed by Tony’s refusal to join in rumble against the Sharks. This reveals that Tony used to team up with the Jets for street fights. Even if Tony initially displays goodness, impulse in a moment of weakness causes him to murder Bernardo. In his book on West Side Story, Nigel Simeone’s discussion of “Something’s Coming” identifies this duality in Tony’s song and character: “while [it] has features that mark out the earlier music for the Jets, the song has a more optimistic and less aggressive outlook than the two preceding numbers [“Prologue” and “Jet Song”]—there is a certain bright-eyed hope about it that sets Tony’s music aside from the negativity and gang mentality of Riff and the Jets.”

Maria, like Tony, displays goodness. She seems to accept Anita and Bernardo’s restrictions on what to wear to the dance and although she does not feel anything for Chino, she treats him nicely. Like Tony, she expects something new to happen in her life. She does not present aspects that depict her as immoral—perhaps only the fact that she lies to Officer Schrank in Act II, Scene 4. Maria does not die at the end, but faces her downfall when she loses Tony. However, maybe because of her righteousness, she is able to rise up against this tragedy that has

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14 Ibid.

15 Nigel Simeone, Leonard Berstein: West Side Story (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 96.
changed her life. Her sudden maturity is implied in the last scene with the final speech that she delivers to the gang members, and also through the fact that as the boys carry Tony’s body away, she lifts her head “triumphantly,” as per the stage direction.

Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* presents its title character after the fashion of an ancient drama. As Joanne Gordon writes, “Sweeney [Todd] might well be compared to the tragic protagonist of classical Greek drama. . . . [He] reeks of a kind of corruption, but he is equally heroic when contrasted with the evil of those who surround him.”\(^{16}\) Indeed, this musical is the only example in which the tragic character’s goodness happens offstage and is referred to at certain points of the play. Although these references are few, they are important to understanding Sweeney Todd as a tragic character. In “The Barber and his Wife,” Todd tells of his own past, referring to himself as naïve and his wife as beautiful. He provides no evidence that the barber was a vile man. On the contrary, he was too naïve and Todd now sees himself as a fool who allowed himself to be the victim of the Judge and the Beadle’s wicked deeds. Mrs. Lovett confirms this in “Poor Thing.” Through her point of view, the barber was the beautiful one, and his wife just a “pretty little thing.”\(^{17}\) However, she too believes the barber was a fool and gives no hint of his intentions. In addition, Todd displays a slight trace of goodness during the second-act quartet “Johanna.” Although he sings it as he murders his clients, he claims that things could have been different “if only angels could prevail.”\(^{18}\) Todd envisions that only then would he, Lucy and, Johanna be the way they once were.

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 159.
The impression that he is an evil man, however, is more prevalent throughout the plot. From his first appearance, we see him as revengeful and venomous. And for the rest of the story, he murders mercilessly and allows his thirst for revenge to overcome his desire to see his daughter again. In addition, he enjoys Mrs. Lovett’s idea of using human flesh as the main ingredient for her meat pies. These aspects may obstruct the view of Sweeney Todd as a tragic character under Aristotle’s theory. For that reason, one cannot dismiss the idea that Sweeney Todd was once Benjamin Barker.\(^{19}\)

Kim, from *Miss Saigon*, fits Aristotle’s theory of the tragic hero in the sense that she, like Oedipus, never expected to experience all of the events in her life. She introduces herself to the marines at the “Dreamland” performance—and at the same time to the audience—as an ingénue. She does not sing about her body’s attributes, but about her heart and dreams. In “The Movie in My Mind,” she sings that the dream she has to find is “a man who will not kill, but fight for [her] instead.”\(^{20}\) Moreover, we pity her when she tells Chris about her family misfortunes, her parents’ death, and their desire to force her into a marriage with a man of their choice. Even after the Vietnam War is over and after years apart from Chris, we pity Kim and her naïve belief that he will return. Her naïveté becomes more plaintive as we see her sharing a song with Chris’s new wife, Ellen. We finally understand her motivations when we understand that she bore Chris a son. Nevertheless, Kim’s character includes the actions of a morally depraved person. First, she

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\(^{19}\) Joseph Marchesani suggests that when Tobias kills Todd, the tragic character is closer to Benjamin Barker’s gullibility than to the mischievousness of the demon barber. This reinforces the idea that the musical is about a good man who experienced a tragic saga. See Joseph Marchesani, “Arresting Development: Law, Love, and the Name-of-the-Father in *Sweeney Todd*,” in *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sandor Goodhart, 171–85 (New York: Garland Publications, 2000).

\(^{20}\) There is no published libretto for *Miss Saigon*. All song lyrics from this musical are drawn from Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, Richard Maltby Jr., Lea Salonga, Claire Moore, Jonathan Pryce, Simon Bowman, and Martin Koch, *Miss Saigon: Original London Cast Recording*, 2 sound discs (107 min.): digital (Wembley, UK: Geffen, 1990), 7.
subjects herself to work as a prostitute. Second, she murders her cousin Thuy. He, who had been promised to marry Kim, cannot accept that she has borne an illegitimate child. Thuy believes that it puts Kim on the American side instead of the Vietnamese and brands their names forever. When he threatens to kill her son, the fruit of her love with Chris, Kim shoots first. These acts do not reveal the tragic character as heinous, but what she is capable of when faced with unexpected circumstances that keep her from her dreams.

In Passion, although Fosca dies, Giorgio is the tragic character. Fosca is not a tragic character because she remains aware of her actions and their consequences. As Martin Gottfried puts it, Fosca is a “formidable woman” who purposely responds “to nature, to music, to literature, and to the ironies of existence.”21 Despite her will to live at the end of the musical, death is not her downfall once she learns that Giorgio loves her. Giorgio, on the other hand, remains sick, injured, resentful of Clara, and without Fosca’s company by the end of the play, and fits the definition of a tragic character. He is a good man who decides to contribute to Fosca’s “only passion”: reading. He tells Colonel Ricci, her cousin, that he would be willing to lend her his favorite books. Fosca sees his goodness as they talk at the castle garden. As she tells him about her hopelessness and loneliness, he tries to persuade her into appreciating life’s pleasures. He tells her: “These thoughts are bad for you. You must concentrate on everything around you that suggests beauty and life. These trees, these flowers, the warm smell of the air….”22 As the plot develops, even if he disapproves of Fosca’s attitudes, he ends up helping her. Her behavior in the dining room, at the mountainside, and on the train all disturb Giorgio, but when her fragile health prevents her from feeling well and, sometimes, even walking, he


assists her. What is more, he agrees to write a letter to Fosca using her own words in scene 7. All he wants is to be friends with Fosca, but to remain Clara’s lover. Two factors suggest that he is not a virtuous man. First, he is having an affair with Clara, a married woman, and proposes to elope with her. Second, he displays a kind of prejudice against Fosca after her insistence starts annoying him. He bases his ideal of true love in Clara’s beauty and that prevents him from understanding, at first, that “love within reason . . . isn’t love.”

In the Poetics, Aristotle includes both passive characters who suffer as a consequence from out-of-the-drama occasions, as well as persons whose choices and actions indicate a flaw in character. These five musicals contain enough elements that enable an application of Aristotelian perspective to their main characters. They are inherently good people, but whose desires cause their downfall, making them the type of character who commits hamartia and causes his or her own suffering.

2. Hamartia and Kinds of Plot

Aristotle proposes three kinds of deeds (hamartiai) that characters in Greek tragedy can enact: one committed in total awareness of the facts, a second done in ignorance, and a third accompanied by a recognition, which prevents the agent from carrying out his intention. He writes that the best tragic effect derives from a hamartia committed in ignorance. In chapter 14 of the Poetics, he argues that hamartia committed in ignorance produces a superior type of

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23 Ibid., 122.

24 These flaws come from the tragic characters’ personalities, but they do not constitute hamartiai, which result from an action related to these flaws.

25 Aristotle Poetics 1453b.
tragedy, whereas the one with recognition results in the worst, with an “untragic” outcome.\footnote{Ibid.} Later in the same chapter, Aristotle contradicts himself stating that a character with recognition produces the best type. Thus, Aristotle places what he had claimed to be the true model of tragedy in chapter 13—a character reaching misfortunes through recognition—as second best in chapter 14 (where recognition thwarts the best tragic effect).\footnote{On this controversy of Aristotle’s Poetics chapters 13 and 14, see Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 54–56; Stephen Halliwell, The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary (London: Duckworth, 1987), 134–39; Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, 228–30; and Elizabeth Belfiore, “The Elements of Tragedy,” in A Companion to Aristotle, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 636–41.} Because Aristotle himself could not decide which type of hamartia makes the best tragedy, I have not considered which type of plot is more effective for the genre. All of the plot types Aristotle categorizes in the Poetics are relevant to this study. Ultimately, Aristotle observed what playwrights had produced up until his time and derived these types of tragic plots from works by the great tragedians of the fifth century.\footnote{Aristotle argues that Euripides’ Medea marks an example of hamartia committed in full knowledge, Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus features hamartia in ignorance, and in Sophocles’ Antigone, Haemon’s realization of his deeds against Creon represents an example of a hamartia that does not last long after the character recognizes his deeds.}

Therefore, the methodology with which I identify the hamartia in the five musicals examined here encompasses two of the three plot types. Sweeney Todd exemplifies conscious hamartia. The other four musicals subscribe to the second type, hamartia in ignorance. In addition, I argue that Todd performs one action in ignorance. Within this second type, I argue that Passion features a hamartia in ignorance that frees the tragic character from culpability. To put another way, Giorgio commits hamartia in ignorance but innocently, which does not happen in the other musicals. Aristotle’s third type of tragic plot according to hamartia, which concerns
recognition before the action takes place, does not appear in any of the works under consideration here.

2.1. Conscious Hamartia

In the first type of hamartia, tragic effect occurs when “the deed [is] done with full knowledge and understanding.”

Aristotle gives only Euripides’ Medea as example. The title character was aware of her actions when she killed her children in order to revenge Jason. However, Aristotle’s “conscious hamartia” can be found in Greek tragedies by other playwrights. In Sophocles’ Antigone, the tragic hero knows she is not allowed to bury her brother’s body due to a State decree, but she consciously defies King Creon and performs a burial ritual in Polynieces’ honor. Her hamartia causes the king to proclaim that she will be buried alive, which prompts her to kill herself.

In Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, the first tragedy of the Oresteia trilogy, the play begins with Clytemnestra planning to kill King Agamemnon as revenge for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia (an act that occurred before the play begins). Both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra consciously carry out their hamartiai in Agamemnon.

Examples of this type of conscious hamartia go beyond Greek tragedy. In Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, all characters consciously commit terrible deeds—betrayal, murder, rape, and usurpation—motivated by revenge and hate. Their deeds conform to what scholar Dorothea Krook calls an “act of shame or horror.” Her theory supports Aristotle’s hamartia principle since

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29 Aristotle Poetics 1453b.

30 I suggest that Antigone’s hamartia, the burial of her brother, was a conscious action. However, one can argue that it was instinctively based on her religious principles. See Charles Levy, “Antigone’s Motives: A Suggested Interpretation,” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 94 (1963): 141–42.
it presupposes an actual activity by the character “which directly precipitates the central spectacle of suffering in the drama.” In the case of the tragic character in *Titus Andronicus*, not only does Titus’s decision to sacrifice Tamora’s son cause the pain and suffering of some characters, but it also starts a chain of events that finally culminates in Titus’s own death. Titus consciously decided to sacrifice Alarbus, and thus his action does not differ from Agamemnon’s decision to sacrifice Iphigenia: both men want to honor a sacred imperative.

*Sweeney Todd* conforms to this type of Aristotelian tragedy with conscious *hamartia*. First, the tragic character sees himself as a victim of a circumstance. The story does not suggest that Benjamin Barker was inherently evil. Judge Turpin sent him away from London as a convict so that he could have Barker’s wife, Lucy, for himself. The tragic character reacts to this situation: having grown revengeful in his exile, he returns as Sweeney Todd, determined to kill the Judge and reclaim his wife and daughter.

Todd’s course of action produces three *hamartia*. He makes a conscious decision to kill Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford. Such determination early in the musical exemplifies premeditated *hamartia*. After Mrs. Lovett tells him that Lucy poisoned herself and Johanna became the Judge’s ward, he declares “let them quake in their boots—Judge Turpin and the Beadle—for their hour has come.” His intention becomes even clearer when he sings that together with his razors, which he addresses as his friends, they “will do wonders.” And also when he concludes the song “My Friends” expressing “my right arm is complete again,” as he

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31 Dorothea Krook, *Elements of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 8. Krook does not apply her “shameful act” theory only to characters who act in full knowledge. Those who act in ignorance can also be capable of shameful and horrible deeds.

32 Wheeler and Sondheim, 40.

33 Ibid., 42.
holds the largest of his razors. He never hesitates in his decision to avenge Judge Turpin and the Beadle. Revenge blinds Todd, and his course of action mirrors Medea’s murder of her children and Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia. In each case, the tragic character could have avoided their actions. In Todd’s case, his actions induce his downfall at the end of the show.

Todd commits his second *hamartia* also consciously. He believes that he has succeeded in putting his decision for revenge into practice when he sings “Pretty Women” with the Judge. However, Anthony’s suddenly bursts in and spoils everything. Like Hamlet’s line “O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth,” Todd decides to kill every man who sits in his barber’s chair for a shave until he has another opportunity with the Judge. This second *hamartia* matches Krook’s theory of a shameful or horrible act. Analogous to Titus in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Todd does not strive for happiness but kills for revenge. Just as Titus’s sacrifice of Alarbus marks the first deed that leads to his own death, mass murder in *Sweeney Todd* initiates a chain of events that will lead to the title character’s own execution.

The suffering and torment from *hamartia* and the reversal of events that results in bad luck define Aristotelian tragedy. Todd’s two *hamartiai* culminate in his own death. However, they do not make him regret or suffer. The painful moment of realization for Todd happens when he understands that he has killed Lucy himself. Therefore, Todd’s murder of the Beggar Woman in desperation to be alone in the parlor with the Judge marks his third *hamartia*. Todd murders the Beggar Woman in ignorance of her true identity, which makes the plot of *Sweeney Todd* subscribe also to the type of tragedy in which the tragic character commits *hamartia* in ignorance.

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34 Ibid., 43.

2.2. *Hamartia* and Ignorance

Ignorance in a tragic character’s course of action indicates one type of *hamartia*. According to Aristotle, *hamartia* presupposes ignorance of one’s action. As the tragic character proceeds with these actions, he or she fails to predict their painful consequences. However, even when acting in ignorance, the protagonist has a greater purpose of which s/he is aware. In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, one can argue that the title character remains ignorant of his deeds and their consequences because of his ambition, or because Lady Macbeth talks him into those terrible crimes. But he ultimately wants to become king, as the third prophecy indicated, and he never loses sight of this goal. By the same token, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* the title character acts in ignorance most of the time and remains unaware that Lauis and Jocasta are his real parents. But he is clearly conscious of his persistence in finding the King’s murderer in order to save his people—a *hamartia* that leads to his downfall. In these two examples, both title characters might be oblivious to incidents around them, but they remain sentient men who understand the amoral act of murder. Therefore, in this second type of tragic plot, ignorance constitutes one part of the protagonist’s character or psyche. The other part derives from the circumstance that the tragic characters see themselves in and, in turn, react conscious of their actions. In other words, *hamartia* “should not be equated with a character’s active ignorance, but that ignorance can satisfy the conditions entailed in the doctrine of *hamartia*.”

In chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that tragedy imitates a serious action. Therefore, the tragic character is human and presents human values. The protagonist might be victim of some external circumstance, but the choices s/he makes in order to face it have their basis in the character’s human condition. Scholar Nancy Sherman argues: “In [the] Aristotelian

\[\text{36} \text{ Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, 135.}\]
model, belief and desire together inform choice. More or less innocent defects in either can precipitate disastrous decisions.”

Employing the ethical concept for unconscious *hamartia* provides an understanding of Aristotle’s ideal of ignorance. Scholars of Greek drama and literature, like Stephen Halliwell, Nancy Sherman, and T. C. W. Stinton, have demonstrated that the *Poetics* alone does not suffice for our comprehension of what Aristotle had in mind when he wrote about deeds and their correlation with human knowledge and human ignorance. As a solution, these authors have provided detailed studies that scrutinize Aristotle’s notion of human principles and behavior in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and how it relates to his theories of Greek drama. Sherman suggests that according to his ethical writings, Aristotle had three “varieties of ignorance” in mind: one resulted from when a person takes an action believing it to be the right thing to be done and the mistake does “not reflect badly on character or effort or judgment”; when a passionate feeling moves someone who then ignores the consequences, revealing a moral defect or fault (“obvious blemishes of character” in Sherman’s words); and ignorance resulted from an unnatural and inhumane action that blinds the person. These “varieties of ignorance” appear in Aeschylus’, Euripides’, and Sophocles’ characters, serving as a postulate of tragedy as a genre.

In this section, I explore tragic characters who have an ultimate goal with their actions, but who end up performing *hamartia* in ignorance. I employ Sherman’s types of ignorance in four of the musicals and demonstrate how they form subtypes of *hamartia* in ignorance. Kim

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38 Ibid., 189.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 190.
(from Miss Saigon) and Tony and Maria (from West Side Story) commit their hamartia believing they are taking the right action given their situation. Street Scene fits in the second subtype of hamartia in ignorance. Mrs. Maurrant believes to some extent to be taking the right action and tries to hide the truth from her neighbors and family, but her affair with Mr. Sankey reveals blemish in her character. Todd’s third hamartia—killing the beggar woman—marks an unnatural action that blinds the protagonist of Sweeney Todd.

Sensible actions represent the first subtype of ignorant hamartia. The tragic character never actually causes his own distress. Events occurred and developed out of his or her reach, and s/he takes what they believe to be the right decision. Appropriately, it matches Aristotle’s characterization: believing that s/he is making the right choice, the tragic character does not foresee the possible consequences. Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus—the tragedy that both Aristotle and Sherman give as example of hamartia in ignorance—fits this category. The tragic character became king after he solved the Sphinx’s riddle, and ignorant that he had killed the king, who happened to be his father, he married the widowed queen, Jocasta, his mother. Unaware that murdering king Laius has caused the plague in Thebes, Oedipus resolves to find this murderer and curses him for the tribulation he has caused. Indeed, one would expect such actions from a noble man—and now king—like Oedipus. His suffering results from his realization that these actions were actually immoral ones (patricide and incest), and he only realizes them because of his incessant efforts to find the king’s murderer. Sophocles included three oracles that foreshadow Oedipus’ saga. J. M. Bremer reminds us that “an oracle does not necessarily imply divine causation, but at any rate it suggests that the gods are implicated in
Oedipus’ downfall.” Even if the gods can predict or interpret the events in Oedipus’ life, they occur through “human action, largely Oedipus’ own.”

In Miss Saigon, Kim’s hamartia exemplifies this subtype of ignorance. First, she finds herself the victim of social problems. Events happening in Vietnam and Bangkok dictate her life and result in the conditions she endures and against which she reacts. Kim chooses actions believing they were propitious. Some of them were indeed the right actions, given the circumstances: Kim killed her cousin Thuy to prevent him from harming her son, and she fled to Bangkok with Tam and the Engineer imagining that this would enable her to come to America and be reunited with Chris. But these actions do not result in regret or suffering, collectively they suggest that Kim believes to be taking the right action. A dead Thuy claims to represent guilt inside Kim’s mind, making her suffer as she remembers the Fall of Saigon, but this results in an unconvincing anguish. Thuy had nothing to do with her suffering during the Fall of Saigon and her unhappiness caused by Chris’s marriage. One could argue that going to Chris’s hotel precipitates her knowledge of the facts and, consequently, her suffering. Kim acts in ignorance and apparently makes a logical decision, since she waited for three years for his return. Her real pain comes from Chris’s marriage to Ellen. Had she not gone to the hotel, Chris might have found her and told her anyway. But by the same token, had John warned Kim about Ellen, as Chris had wanted him to, Kim would have taken her life earlier in the story, but the suicide would still have happened. In other words, Kim found herself trapped. Independent of her course of actions, she would eventually find out that she had waited in vain. This results in her hamartia. Like Oedipus’ insistence in finding the murderer, the moral thing to do, Kim insists in waiting for her husband.

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Kim fits the Aristotelian model of a character who simply aimed for happiness, but ended up experiencing tragic events. She could have avoided it and moved on, but her dreams and hopes that Chris would return prevented her from doing so. Their intense and passionate relationship during the last days of the Vietnam War makes Kim take for granted the certainty of his return, especially after she gave birth to his son. In addition, Kim and Chris had married in a Vietnamese ceremony. It seems reasonable that Kim waits for her husband to return and believes in the principles of this institution (although during the ceremony Chris had said that he could not understand the ritual). At the toast after the ceremony, Kim had been elected Miss Saigon. Of all the girls, she was the fortunate one, chosen by a Western man who would give her a better life. In fact, the musical emphasizes Miss Saigon’s expectancy for this dream to come true rather than her actual actions while she waits for three years.

In *West Side Story*, two aspects ensnare Tony and Maria: their ethnic difference and the rivalry between the Jets, a gang Tony belongs to, and the Sharks, a gang led by Maria’s brother. The ethnic and cultural differences create such an obstacle for the couple that they do not seem to find enough resources to fight against it. In Act I scene 5, Tony says that Maria’s father would like him, but Maria interrupts him saying that her father would never relent. “No. He is like Bernardo: afraid,” she says. In addition, Doc and Anita both try to dissuade the interracial relationship, but neither Tony nor Maria can deny their love for each other. The lovers cannot find any alternative to confront their ethnic differences. It works like the rivalry between the Montague and Capulet families in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the Shakespeare’s tragedy, the protagonists choose to elope, a *hamartia* that causes a chain of events that culminate in their

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42 Laurens and Sondheim, 161.
downfall. But in Laurens’s book for this musical, Tony and Maria, before talking about eloping, take another action that marks their *hamartia*.

Given their situation, Tony and Maria turn to another course of action: to try and ease tensions between the Jets and Sharks. This gang conflict had caused the chance meeting of the tragic characters. Riff (one of the Jets) asked Tony to go to the dance so that they could challenge the Sharks to the rumble. Tony convinces the Sharks to a fistfight instead of a rumble and successfully manages to distract the youths’ attention by making only two guys fight and not all of the gangs’ members. Convinced nothing terrible will take place, Tony tells Maria he will not join the guys in the rumble. And at this moment, the lovers commit their *hamartia*. Maria believes that Tony can go and stop the fight. Tony’s belief that nobody would get hurt in a fistfight fails to convince Maria, who says “Any fight is not good for us.”

Tony’s line “Everything is good for us and we are good for everything” indicates his naïve belief that they should ignore the rumble and nothing serious will happen. Tony almost avoids *hamartia*, but immediately afterwards, to please Maria, he agrees to try and convince the gangs not to fight.

None of them could predict that Tony’s presence would turn the fistfight into a rumble. In various places in the first act, the Jets and the Sharks had claimed that they were prepared for more than a fistfight. They had knives and were prepared to be on the defensive should the opposite gang attack. Tony and Maria’s love for one another has blinded them to the seriousness of the situation, and Maria considers the action of stopping the fight to be a right choice. Besides, the lovers could never predict that Tony’s presence at the fistfight would make Bernardo challenge him to fight. Tension grows and leads to the rumble the gangs had agreed not to carry

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43 Ibid., 182.

44 Ibid.
out, which results in Bernardo killing Riff, and Tony killing Bernardo in revenge. Those actions precipitate Tony’s death, and Tony and Maria’s downfall.\(^{45}\) Tony and Maria share with Oedipus and Kim the conviction that despite their ignorance of some facts, they are making the right choice. This confirms a parallel between Broadway musicals and Greek tragedy.

Another type of ignorance Aristotle had in mind, according to scholar Nancy Sherman, develops from the character’s passionate feelings and reveals a moral defect. Tragic characters can avoid this second subtype of ignorant *hamartia*. In Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, Deianeira could have avoided the centaur’s revenge on Heracles if she herself was not controlled by jealousy. She pursues Nessos in order to obtain a love portion that she intends to give to her husband Heracles to drink so that she can have him back. However, she should have suspected that it was poison since Nessos was Heracles’ rival. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, the title character could also have avoided his own pain if he could have controlled his irrational jealousy. All of his resentment of Desdemona, which Iago had manipulated, contributed to his murdering her. Human imperfection appears in these characters’ reactions to their respective circumstances, whether a god or another man exacerbated it. Deianeira and Othello display moral defects as their jealousy causes them to kill their beloved ones, unaware that can precipitate suffering.\(^{46}\)

In *Street Scene*, Mrs. Maurrant’s *hamartia* reveals a moral defect she could have avoided. Although when she married Mr. Maurrant she was pursuing happiness, she ends up seeing

\(^{45}\) According to scholar Irene G. Dash, Tony’s attempt to stop the rumble has the same tragic implication as Romeo trying to break the duel between Mercutio and Tybalt. Romeo however does not stop this fight because he had agreed with Juliet this would be the right choice. He just wants to protect his friend Mercutio. Irene G. Dash, *Shakespeare and the American Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 109.

\(^{46}\) Deianeira is not the tragic hero in *Trachiniae*. Her action, instead, affects Heracles. The main character (or tragic character) may not necessarily commit the *hamartia* that will lead to his/her suffering.
herself trapped in her marriage, and her unhappiness propels her to seek happiness outside her marriage. Her affair with Mr. Sankey marks Mrs. Maurrant’s *hamartia*. The libretto features elements that help us understand her affair with the milk collector. When the musical begins, we learn that she has already been intimate with Mr. Sankey. Her aria “Somehow I Never Could Believe” reveals that she saw herself as hopeless, with all her dreams dashed. Still, she knows she can have pleasure in life, for her desire for happiness bookends the aria. The affair with Mr. Sankey indicates her reaction to her feeling trapped. Even if the neighbors condemn her actions, we can understand Mrs. Maurrant’s feelings of wanting something more even if we do not condone her actions. Mr. Maurrant’s aria “Let Things Be Like They Always Was” reveals his conservativeness, which has smothered his wife’s dreams and ambitions.

*Hamartia* in *Street Scene* arises from the human condition of Mrs. Maurrant’s unhappiness. Just like Deianeira and Othello, Mrs. Maurrant cannot endure her situation, feelings, and troubles anymore and takes an action without stopping to think about enduring aftermath. Part of Mrs. Maurrant’s *hamartia* comes from her compromising her own principles, believing that her actions would bring her happiness. Mrs. Maurrant’s *hamartia* follows what Sherman argues for Deianeira: *hamartia* “seems almost avoidable. She took a calculated risk, and lost. . . . But still, her mistake has a human proportion that dampens any tendency to reproach her. . . . She tried, but then failed in the worst possible way.”

*Street Scene* tells the story of a middle-aged woman, responsible mother, and dutiful housewife who exposes a weakness in her character unaware that it leads her to suffering. This Pulitzer-prize winning play and American opera dramatizes a tragedy worthy of Greek and Shakespearean drama.

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47 Sherman, 190–91.
“An act of unnatural and inhuman passion”\textsuperscript{48} represents the third and last subtype of hamartia in ignorance. Sherman reminds us that Aristotle discussed this kind of ignorant hamartia with Euripides’ Medea as an example. For Aristotle, Medea committed her deeds fully aware of their consequences. Sherman, on the other hand, argues that although Medea intended for Jason to suffer with the death of the children, the tragic character remained unaware of the magnitude of her own actions.

One of the reasons that makes Sweeney Todd such a rich musical play is that the title character correlates to Medea in two ways. First, as Aristotle wrote about Medea, Todd too committed hamartiai consciously. He decided to kill Judge Turpin and all of his customers fully aware of his actions. However, his third hamartia—the decision to kill the Beggar Woman—fulfills Sherman’s third subtype of hamartia in ignorance, because he never thought that the magnitude of his actions would make him suffer at the end. After Todd realizes he killed Lucy, we are unwilling to forgive him for his terrible deeds, but we might take pity on him for an action committed in ignorance. First, he cannot imagine that Lucy could still be alive. He believed Mrs. Lovett’s lie that Lucy had taken poison and committed suicide. This results in a classical case of mistaken identity. Second, he never considered that killing people could be personally disastrous, like Sherman supposes that Medea also never did. Todd suffers at the end because his understanding comes too late: when he has already murdered Lucy. The tragic hero has caused his own downfall. Even if Todd deliberately engaged in horrible deeds and allowed them to overwhelm his longing to seeing his daughter once again, his three hamartiai cause his suffering and bad luck, two requisite principals for tragedy.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 191.
In conclusion, Todd’s third *hamartia*, and Mrs. Maurrant’s, Tony’s and Maria’s, and Kim’s *hamartiai* depend partly on external circumstances to which they react and partly on a type of ignorance. Nevertheless, they make decisive actions. Kim longs to reunite with Chris again and waits for him for three years, unaware of his subsequent Western marriage. Tony and Maria want to get married despite their ethnic differences and believe that quelling the gang violence can mark the first step in that reconciliation. Mrs. Maurrant’s selfish desire for a better and happier life precipitates her affair with Mr. Sankey, and she remains oblivious of possible consequences. Sweeney Todd does not want anyone spoiling his plan of revenge and decides to get rid of the Beggar Woman by killing her unaware that she is his wife. Human feelings such as naïve hope, blind love, selfish desire, and murderous revenge move these tragic characters to perform their *hamartiai*.

### 2.3. Hamartia and Innocence

In the four musicals discussed above, I have argued that ignorance comprises only part of the characters’ *hamartiai*. Circumstances or other people’s actions kept them ignorant of some crucial facts, but their intentions still guide their actions. In this sense, culpability may be attached to actions when done in ignorance, simply because they could have been avoided. Whether they are worthy of forgiveness depends on their specific actions. Kim’s waiting for Chris’s return does not disrupt morality, and she believes it to be the morally correct action. Tony and Maria strive for peace, and their plan for Tony to interfere at the rumble convinced them that their love would succeed. Mrs. Maurrant and Sweeney Todd, on the other hand, flaunt moral strictures. Audience members may find it easier to forgive Kim, Tony, and Maria than Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Todd. However, these tragic characters all share a similar determination.
But some tragic plots may feature tragic characters who do not have a moment to reveal their intentions explicitly. Just like the previous cases of *hamartia*, this, too, depends on the tragic character’s human condition and passions. The protagonist acts and performs *hamartia* that leads to his suffering, but the absence of a greater intention drives him to act according to momentary feelings, which free him from culpability. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, the hero’s *hamartia* depends on a momentary decision: his oath to the nurse. Precisely because of promising silence in exchange for information about Phaedra’s intentions he cannot subsequently prove his integrity. This leads to his exile and subsequent death. Hippolytus never took a conscious action for a specific goal (one that the audience would expect for him to achieve by the end of the play). In addition, he never expected that the nurse had ulterior motives and his stepmother would blame her death on him. Euripides makes this clear in order to give prominence to Hippolytus’ innocence.

In this section, I explore the *hamartia* moment in *Passion*. I argue that Giorgio’s *hamartia* occurs when he decides to resolve a temporary problem, but which causes his final anguish. Fosca bears the responsibility for the situation in which Giorgio finds himself. She has fallen in love with him and realizes he is a learned and kind man who treats her well and lends books to her. She wants him to discover that her love is truer and more pure than Clara’s.

Complications near the *hamartia* moment begin with Giorgio’s belief that he already knows love, as he sings in “Happiness” and talks about it with Fosca at the castle garden. Fosca takes her first action towards making Giorgio understand her feelings when he tells her he knows love is “like wine, an intoxication, a great blindness, if you will.”\(^49\) Fosca reacts saying, “I’ve

\(^{49}\) Lapine and Sondheim, 34.
read about that love, but you speak of it as one who lives it." She tells him to be more realistic about love and not so book-bound. In this same scene, he then promises her his friendship. After writing to her that there is someone else in his life who he really loves (“Trio”), Giorgio and Fosca conclude:

FOSCA: You can also hope that we will not see each other again.
GIORGIO: That may be the best course of action.

Giorgio believes that he has solved the problem and Fosca will not bother him anymore. However, she falls sick. The doctor, aware of the past events, persuades Giorgio to visit her, asserting that he would make her feel better. He even praises Giorgio for his goodness: “You are a good-looking young man. Beauty is something one pays for, the same as goodness—another quality you embody.” Giorgio concurs and goes to her room (scene 7), which creates his hamartia moment. He believes that he is in love with Clara and that he will never feel anything for Fosca, and these convictions explain his line “I am here because I chose to be.” He does not have to ponder over the consequences of his actions. In addition, Giorgio does not have a greater goal with this hamartia other than granting the doctor’s request. This decision to visit Fosca’s bedroom may be a well-intentioned momentary decision, but Giorgio never imagined it could change his life. His hamartia shares similarities to Hippolytus’s. Euripide’s hero never presumed Phaedra’s actions would affect him, so he swore an oath to her nurse (who informed him about Phaedra’s deeds). Just the same, Giorgio could not foresee how Fosca’s consuming adoration

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 53.
52 Ibid., 55.
53 Ibid., 56.
54 Hippolytus scolds Phaedra for her love, just like Giorgio admonishes Fosca.
could transform his feelings, so he granted the doctor’s request to pay her a visit. In the end, his suffering comes from the realization that he understood the transformation of his feelings too late, near Fosca’s death.\textsuperscript{55}

To conclude, an analysis of the *hamartia* moment should consider the plot in its entirety in order to locate the moment where it occurs. It can be found when changes in the tragic character’s trajectory produce bad luck. Only one musical under consideration here exemplifies conscious *hamartia*. In *Sweeney Todd*, two of Todd’s *hamartiai* do not cause the tragic character to suffer. But in all five musicals, the tragic characters display a type of ignorance at the *hamartia* moment. In four of them, *hamartia* in ignorance may not totally liberate the tragic character from culpability because he or she could actually have avoided the deed as in the case of Mrs. Maurrant’s adultery, Tony and Maria’s decision to try and stop the rumble, Todd’s murder of the Beggar Woman, and Kim’s endlessly waiting for Chris’ return. Giorgio’s *hamartia* exemplifies a protagonist who commits *hamartia* in ignorance of the consequences and that affords him innocence.

### 3. *Hamartia* in Songs and Underscoring

Songs and underscoring enrich the *hamartia* moments described above in different ways: *hamartia* may occur during a song, it may occur in a dialogue but a song follows that illustrates or amplifies the action, or it may happen with underscoring. Because musical theater composers employ music as a dramatic device, the use of music for these actions falls within the conventions of the genre. Therefore, in this section, I use these conventions—already theorized

in musical theater as a genre—in order to demonstrate how songs and underscoring help amplify Aristotle’s concept of *hamartia*.

In *Sweeney Todd* and *Miss Saigon*, the *hamartia* moment occurs when characters are singing a song. The song sequence “Epiphany,” “God That’s Good,” and “Johanna (Quartet),” even if interrupted by an intermission, contains Todd’s enactment of his second *hamartia*, the mass murder of his clients. The song “Epiphany” begins with his statement that “we all deserve to die” accompanied by a fragmentary rhythm in the bass line. Todd then clearly states his first *hamartia*: “I will have vengeance, I will have salvation” and expresses that this one is no longer enough: “Not one man, no, nor ten men, nor a hundred can assuage me.” Sondheim sets these two instances to the same music and contrasts them with the music that Todd now consciously decides to commit his second *hamartia*: “And I will have him back even as he gloats. In the meantime I’ll practice on less honorable throats.” Here Sondheim’s music reinforces Todd’s second *hamartia* with a march tempo and a melody not found anywhere else in the score.

Unlike Todd’s first *hamartia*, this second one turns out to be enacted both offstage and on. When the second act begins, we see how prosperous Mrs. Lovett’s business has become and how much the customers enjoy her pies. We can assume, then, some men must have already been murdered to provide her with the meat for her pies. In the next scene, during the quartet “Johanna,” Todd

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57 Wheeler and Sondheim, 102.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 This song is also an example of reversal of the tragic character’s course of action. I discuss this in chapter two.
slits the throats of his clients on stage. In this consummation of the action, he appears fully conscious of his deeds. As he slits the throats, he sings that he may never see his daughter again, but this is not a problem, for he has his revenge to focus on. “I’m fine, Johanna, I’m fine,” he sings. The song reveals how he allows his thirst for revenge to surpass his desire to see his daughter again. “I think I miss you less and less as every day goes by.” Through an “integrated” perspective, those three songs introduce and provide Todd’s enactment of his second *hamartia*.

In *Miss Saigon*, the song “I Still Believe” expresses the Kim’s *hamartia*. After Kim’s and Chris’s last duet together, “The Last Night of the World,” we learn that three years have passed. When she starts singing “I Still Believe,” we do not know that the lovers are no longer a couple. Her lyrics slowly tell us that she insists on waiting for his return. She sings about seeing him sleeping and being by his side, but then she sings, “I know that this was years ago.” When Ellen starts singing about her conflict (she hopes one day she will be able to understand what goes on inside Chris’s mind), we learn that he has moved on with his life, whereas Kim has not. That clarifies her *hamartia* because the audience will then conclude that her waiting will be in vain. Furthermore, Ellen and Kim sing together. When it occurs, Kim sings the same melody with which she started the song, but Ellen sings new music, which represents her apprehension at not understanding Chris. They both share the belief that each of them will be with Chris until they die. When they assert this, they finally sing the same music and words.

Another moment later in the musical accentuates Kim’s *hamartia*. In the song “This Is the Hour,” the Engineer tries to convince her to marry Thuy, so that he can save his own life.

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61 Wheeler and Sondheim, 156.

62 Ibid., 159.

63 Schönberg, Boublil, and Maltby Jr., 13.
Kim sings: “I have a husband I love, real as the sun in the sky. I cannot live with a lie.” At this moment, all the musical tension is gone, and the orchestration features flutes, harp, and violins in a high range. This short passage contrasts with the brass and percussion that had been creating tension to Kim and Thuy’s dialogue and highlights her waiting, reminding us of her hamartia. Immediately afterwards, she sings to Thuy that “Chris will come to me like the Phoenix and he’ll take me off on its wings,” to which he replies, “Do you still think crazy things?” By now, brass instruments and percussion return to portray Kim’s uneasiness. These two songs, “I Still Believe” and “This Is the Hour,” introduce Kim’s protracted waiting and reveal that hamartia is taking place in this through-sung musical.

In his book *The Musical as Drama*, Scott McMillin defends that “characters who break into song are being enlarged by entering the second order of time [the first order of time being the book and the second, the songs] and displaying their mastery of repetitive, lyric form.” For McMillin, songs in musical theater take the characters and the situation they enacted through spoken lines to another realm, namely, that of the song. Thus, “songs . . . do not further characterization, they change the mode of characterization.” Todd’s first hamartia and Tony’s and Maria’s in *West Side Story* exemplify McMillin’s theory. These characters’ hamartiai occur through dialogue and a song follows to illustrate the action. Todd declares his first conscious hamartia when he swears revenge to Judge Turpin and the Beadle as he “strikes ferociously on

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64 Ibid., 14.

65 Ibid.


67 Ibid., 8.
the pie counter with his fists,” after Mrs. Lovett had informed him about Lucy’s death and that Johanna had become the Judge’s ward. Once he concludes that he is going to take the revenge using his razors, which Mrs. Lovett had kept for him, Todd breaks into the song “My Friends.” The three-note ostinato represents his obsession with the revenge he swore before singing. Even when Mrs. Lovett starts singing with him (imagining that he sings in elation to her) the ostinato does not disappear, revealing that he does not hear her since he is fixated on revenge alone. Only after singing “My Friends” does Mr. Todd feel confident to claim, “At last, my right arm is complete again.”

In a similar manner in West Side Story, the decision to take the *hamartia* action develops initially through dialogue without music. Having agreed that Tony should try to stop the rumble, Tony and Maria trust they will indeed be together forever, free from conflict and prejudice. As scholar Irene Dash suggests, they “hope that their mutual pursuit of one another, of love, and of a normal relationship between them, of suitor and pursued, will erase the hostility between their families, just as Friar Lawrence [in Shakespeare’s play] hopes that Romeo and Juliet’s love will reconcile their families.” Such naive hope allows Tony and Maria to dream of marriage, a life together “One Hand, One Heart.” Breaking into this song reveals another “mode of characterization,” in McMillin’s words, of the characters’ naivety of tragic consequences. Bernstein’s choice to change this song from the balcony scene to this moment proved to be an effective one. The balcony scene is too early a moment for the lovers to sing about marriage. The song “Tonight” refers to the present, the night they met each other, while “One Hand, One

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68 Wheeler and Sondheim, 40.

69 Ibid., 43.

Heart” two scenes later references their future as a married couple. Just like Todd, Tony and Maria believe that their actions will enable them to reach their goal. In their hamartia scenes, Todd breaks into song to contemplate his “friends” and revenge, and Tony and Maria their future life together.71

In Street Scene, Passion, and during Todd’s murder of the Beggar Woman in Sweeney Todd, the hamartia moment features musical underscoring only. In Street Scene, Mrs. Maurrant’s initial choice to have an affair occurs offstage before the drama of the musical begins. When the play begins, we learn that Mrs. Maurrant and Mr. Sankey have already had occasional meetings. Mrs. Maurrant’s aria “Somehow I Never Could Believe” recounts her misfortunes and dashed dreams, explaining why she has committed such hamartia. It imparts her desire and hopes of having a happier life. Adultery occurs on stage only once, when she invites Mr. Sankey to come up after Mr. Maurrant has gone to New Haven and their children have left. This scene develops with underscored music: the cello ostinato, the clarinets’ minor second, and the violins’ high passage all quote from Sam’s “Lonely House.” To this music, Sam had sung that when everything is quiet, the house gives him a sigh: “sometimes I hear a neighbor snoring, sometimes I hear a baby cry, sometimes I hear the staircase cracking, sometimes a distant telephone.” But soon “the quiet settles down again.”72 Something similar is about to happen at the enactment of Mrs. Maurrant’s adultery: everything seems to be fine, and that same music warns that the situation will get out of order. Sam, sitting on the steps, tries to warn Mrs. Maurrant of Mr. Maurrant’s unexpected return. The protagonist, however, does not seem to

71 The real action of Tony and Maria’s hamartia—Tony stopping the fistfight—starts out without music, with just dialogue in the first part of scene 9. Music does not start until the moment Riff hits Bernardo, making the first move to the rumble. When instrumental music appears in this scene, hamartia has already taken place.

72 Rice and Hughes, 34.
listen. Thus, those elements from Sam’s song during the adultery scene inform the audience that Mrs. Maurrant is committing *hamartia*.

Also in this scene, as Mr. Sankey goes up to the apartment and Sam “sees the drawn shades, deeply disturbed, he sits down on the steps and begins to read,” the music grows in tension until it reaches the chords and melody from the opening of the show. This is the only moment where Weill repeats the opening four measures of the overture. The juxtaposition of diminished chords in fortissimo and the “largo” tempo had formed a disturbing and dissonant melody before the curtain went up, informing the listener something tragic would happen. In the scene of adultery, the “largo” creates the climax of a tension that Weill had been creating since after Sam and Rose had finished their duet “We’ll Go Away Together.” The same juxtaposition of diminished chords reminds us that Mr. Sankey going up the stairs may result in something with tragic consequences. The bass line from “Lonely House” had appeared since Rose had left with Mr. Easter leaving Sam alone. Weill kept it during the “largo” section. It might represent the connection between Sam’s and Mrs. Maurrant’s loneliness. When this bass line appears as a solo to be repeated ad lib., the published score reads: “Sankey appears. Sam and Mrs. Maurrant see each other and both become tense with excitement.” This bass line below the dissonant melody from the opening reflects the action on stage after Mr. Sankey enters the house: Sam (‘deeply disturbed’) sees the tragic character’s *hamartia* taking place. By restating music from the musical’s introduction and material from “Lonely House,” Weill succeeds in foreshadowing in the music the information that this scene is a *hamartia* moment, which will lead to the tragic character’s bad luck and ultimate downfall.

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73 Ibid., 69.

74 Kurt Weill, Elmer Rice, and Langston Hughes, *Street Scene* (New York: Chappell & Co., 1948), 221. Sam also sings Mrs. Maurrant’s melody when she dies, another way in which Weill connects these two characters.
In *Passion*, musical underscoring also informs *hamartia*. Sondheim employs it to make the transition from Giorgio’s dialogue with the doctor to the song “I Wish I Could Forget You” in Scene 7. At the very moment Giorgio enters Fosca’s bedroom, the show’s main theme sounds from the orchestra. According to Sondheim himself, this theme (see Example 1.1) reflects their love mood.\(^\text{75}\)

**Example 1.1. The “Love Mood” motif from *Passion***

At this point, Giorgio is ignorant of his own feelings, because he believes he loves Clara and his relationship with Fosca has been clarified in their previous scene’s dialogue. As they talk, the theme develops into what will be Fosca’s song. The theme at the opening of scene 7 might not call attention to the visit itself, but it suggests that this scene will change Giorgio’s mood. In “I Wish I Could Forget You,” Fosca uses the motif to change Giorgio’s point of view. She sings what she wished she could hear from him and makes him write down her perspective on his love and feelings in a letter. It shakes Giorgio, who begins to understand Fosca’s true feelings. Therefore, the fact he enters her room marks a pivotal moment in the story, and the motif in the underscoring bares the responsibility of informing the *hamartia* device.

In *Sweeney Todd*, underscoring music foreshadows a fateful action, one the protagonist will subsequently regret: Todd’s third *hamartia*, the murder of the Beggar Woman. Before the actual killing, she entered in Todd’s barbershop and “mimes opening a window, then clutches an

imaginary baby to her; pats and rocks it, cradles it and smiles.”\textsuperscript{76} These are the same gestures that Lucy pantomimed during Mrs. Lovett’s “Poor Thing.” The tune with which she rocks the imaginary baby evokes the minuet in Mrs. Lovett’s song, when she told Todd about Lucy going to the Judge’s masked ball.\textsuperscript{77} Both melodies begin with an alternation of two notes a half step apart from each other, followed by an ascending minor third and a descending fifth. In the Beggar Woman’s rendition, the tune acquires a distorted rhythm beginning with triplets on the anacrusis. It might represent her state of mind, which deformed the music she had heard when the men raped her at the ball. When Todd arrives at the barbershop and sees her, the orchestra breaks in two: one part plays the “Alms” motif, whereas the other plays the motif from “Wait.” Maybe the music represents what Todd has been waiting for so long: Lucy. But because he does not know her true identity and cannot hear the non-diegetic music, he remains oblivious to the musical clues. In addition, at the very moment Lucy dies, the orchestra plays the melody with which Todd lamented “And my Lucy lies in ashes” during the first act. Not only her movements, but also the music reveal the Beggar Woman’s true identity, and even before Todd kills her, we realize that he will murder his wife in ignorance of her true identity.

4. Conclusion

The attributes of hamartia appear in these five musicals in four ways. First, in all of them the tragic character commits hamartia. The possibility that other characters have responsibility for the tragic character’s suffering does not apply here. However, supporting characters set in motion the tragic character’s saga and create the circumstance during which the tragic character

\textsuperscript{76} Wheeler and Sondheim, 191.

\textsuperscript{77} The theme also underscores the dialogue between the Beggar Woman and Anthony, when she explains to the sailor who Johanna is in “Ah, Miss.”
reacts before the actual *hamartia* occurs. Because it is a response, *hamartia* establishes a relationship between those involved. On Broadway, gods, oracles, or supernatural forces do not exert importance in the storyline. The six tragic characters from the five shows under consideration have their lives changed because of somebody else’s or their own misguided behavior, lies, tricks, deceit, or madness following what Aristotle theorized in the *Poetics*.

These tragic characters commit *hamartia* in two different ways:

A. One single action or effort: Mrs. Maurrant’s adultery, Todd’s murderer of the Beggar Woman, Kim’s waiting for Chris, and Giorgio’s visit to Fosca’s bedroom in scene 7

B. One single action or effort which is premeditated and later enacted: Tony and Maria’s decision to try to stop the rumble, and Todd’s decisions to take revenge against the Judge and to kill his customers

In regard to the number of such actions, *Sweeney Todd* is the only musical that presents more than one *hamartia* moment.

Theorist T. R. Henn suggests that in tragedy, “the dramatic character . . . has a limited amount of free-will. For the sake of dramatic consistency he possesses the potency to follow course A or course B. He chooses B, either through *hamartia*, or because of hubris, or both.”

In none of these musicals does the tragic character make a decision to follow an action on account of hubris. But in all cases, the tragic characters display a fatal motivation: Mrs. Maurrant’s selfish decision to seek happiness in an extramarital affair, Tony and Maria’s desire to be together in the face of cultural enmity between their respective cultural groups, Todd’s revenge, Kim’s naïve decision to wait for Chris, and Giorgio’s decision to visit Fosca in her bedroom. The

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ignorance of some important fact or circumstance allows their *hamartia* to produce tragedy. Finally, these five musicals employ common musical theater compositional techniques to highlight those important moments. By breaking into song, Todd and Kim introduce and enact their *hamartiai*. Todd, and Tony and Maria have their mode of expression changed when they sing, respectively, “My Friends” and “One Hand, One Heart.” These songs, following McMillin’s theory, characterize those characters’ *hamartiai* in a way that dialogues alone were unable to fulfill. And underscoring music reinforces, informs, or foreshadows Mrs. Maurrant’s, Giorgio’s and Todd’s first *hamartia*. 
Chapter Two

“We All Deserve to Die”: Complication and Denouement in the Tragic Plot

The tragedy of life is not that man loses, but that he almost wins.
—Heywood Broun

1. Aristotle’s Tragic Plot

In chapter 10 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle provides his ideal plot structure for a tragedy. First, he classifies plots as simple and complex, and suggests that the presence of reversal and recognition in the character’s change of fortune marks the difference between them. Simple plots contain continuous action and the tragic character experiences bad luck without reversal or recognition. In complex plots, these two devices derive from a chain of events and their aftermath occurs according to necessity and probability. In addition, Aristotle implies that every plot—simple or complex—comprises a denouement of earlier events, from before the beginning of the play. A play with complex plot brings yet another denouement, and reversal and recognition accompany it.

In chapter 11, Aristotle defines reversal and recognition. Reversal (*peripeteia* in Aristotle’s terminology) “entails a complete contradiction of expectation and intention on the part of the agent.”\(^1\) Considering Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* once more, reversal occurs when

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the title character realizes that the messenger reveals exactly the opposite of what he expected. In other words, Oedipus tried to avoid the oracle’s prophecy, but it ends up coming true nonetheless. Recognition (*anagnorisis*) brings the character to light, to knowledge “concerning matters which bear on their prosperity or affliction.”² It may occur in tandem with reversal, and may be recognition of objects, identity, relationship (friendship, enmity), or someone else’s actions or deeds. Reversal and recognition both precipitate suffering, and since they display the tragic character’s awareness of a contrary expectation, some ignorance is included.³ Most importantly, reversal and recognition are necessary because of the tragic character’s actions and not accident or chance.⁴

In chapter 18, Aristotle divides the plot in two sections. He defines “complication” all the moments up until the beginning of the tragic character’s change of luck. “Denouement,” (*lysis*) for Aristotle, encompasses from the change of luck until the tragic character confronts bad luck, usually in the last scene.⁵ In short, Aristotle introduces in these three chapters four important devices that together define the tragic plot.⁶

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2 Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a.

3 Like *hamartia*, reversal and recognition are common devices in comedy. The difference lies in the outcome: in tragedy they lead to bad luck and in comedy they lead to good luck.


5 For another theory of complication and denouement, see German dramatist Gustav Freytag’s pyramid for dramatic structure in his 1883 book *Die Technik des Dramas.* For him, a play starts with an exposition, “rising actions” propel the drama to a climax, after which some “falling actions” take the protagonists to a denouement. Gustav Freytag, *Die Technik des Dramas* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1886), 76–92.

6 Such plot unity introduced in the *Poetics,* however, is not necessarily what distinguishes tragedy from other genres. Aristotle’s point is that such unity and these plot concepts (recognition, reversal, complication, and denouement) culminate in the tragic character’s suffering and experience with bad luck. Concerning the problems of Aristotle’s proposed theory, see T. R. Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy* (London: University Paperbacks, 1966) and Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
The concepts of necessity and probability mentioned above possess necessary elements for plot unity. In chapter 9, Aristotle writes that every action in tragedy must be developed through necessity and probability. This theory enhances Aristotle’s conviction that tragedy is an imitation of serious actions. Probable actions are those that happen most of the time, expressing the tragic character’s “human realities and conditions of existence.”

One must look back into all the characters’ past deeds in order to judge if the experience of bad luck is reasonable and likely to have happened. Necessity reveals what is inevitable in the tragic character’s life after his/her hamartia. It is strongly connected with Aristotle’s principle that because the tragic character disturbed moral order, punishment is inescapable. In this regard, probability and necessity contribute to understanding why after hamartia, reversal and recognition occur the tragic characters die or suffer at the end.

Aristotle argues that if tragedy was probable and necessary for the protagonist, then his or her saga creates pity and fear. Pity arouses because from the beginning of the play we experience the tragic character’s ignorance of facts (or of some facts) and his/her initial desire for happiness, which is never realized. Fear results from our realization that the action enacted on stage, being an imitation of a serious action, might happen in our own lives. No one is completely free from fallibility.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that the five musicals under consideration have complex plots, and therefore reversal and recognition moments. In addition, I show that the tragic character’s anguish (death and/or suffering) in the final scene occurs through probability and necessity, and it is “not only individually believable, but also comprehensible as part of a unified

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totality.” I identify which moment in each show marks the change of fortune, consequently suggesting when complication ends and denouement begins. For this aim, my methodology consists in answering these four questions for each musical:

A. How do the tragic characters express their suffering and pain resulting from their *hamartia*?

B. What is the knowledge or insight that the tragic character reaches, and what marks reversal, the opposite of what the protagonist expected to achieve?

C. How do the events around him/her and their own actions contribute to bad luck according to probability and necessity?

D. Does each of these tragic musicals arouse pity and fear?

Because I intend to show that these five musicals feature complex plots, this discussion—different from the one for *hamartia* in chapter one—presents no classification or categorization. For this reason, I discuss each musical chronologically. For this chapter’s two other sections, I investigate the songs and/or underscoring that represent and depict musically the tragic character’s reversal and recognition (therefore the beginning of denouement) and final anguish.9

1.1. *Street Scene*

As it occurs in tragedy, Mrs. Maurrant’s *hamartia* makes her suffer. Not only is she affected by her marriage and tumultuous relationship with her husband, but also she is weary of the neighbor’s remarks behind her back and judging her for not being an honorable woman. Mrs. Maurrant is offended and disturbed with Mrs. Jones’s comment that more women should live up

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8 Ibid.

9 As in chapter one, the discussion in this chapter includes only the protagonist of each musical and his or her songs. Their relationship with other characters and subplots appears in chapter three.
to the fact they have children and a husband. In “There’ll Be Trouble” (in the published score, Kurt Weill termed it a “Scene and Trio”), Mrs. Maurrant suffers when her husband does not admit that she has been a good wife. “What else have I been doing all these years, tell me, but looking after my children and you, Frank?” she asks her husband. He, like the neighbors, does not appreciate her efforts. She tries to explain in the trio with Mr. Maurrant and Rose, “I’ve always tried to make a home for you. I’ve always tried to do my best. You know I have!” Aware that his wife has been absent and seems to hold back information about where she has been and who she has been with, Mr. Maurrant warns his wife that if she does not “stay in her own home and mind her family,” there will be trouble.

Mrs. Maurrant’s reversal and recognition begin after this quarrel (in which Rose, their daughter, also participates). As Mr. Maurrant leaves infuriated, Mrs. Maurrant sings the final section of “There Will Be Trouble.” The lyrics “I tried to be a good wife, but he never seemed to care” marks the beginning of denouement and of her change of fortune. Her recognition involves her marriage. She acknowledges all her effort in search of a happy marital life was in vain and understands she will never be able to change her husband’s ways. Rose’s suggestion that Mr. Sankey should appear less frequently also leads Mrs. Maurrant to realize that her daughter is also aware of Mr. Sankey. The affair with another man did not change the protagonist’s life in a positive way. She reacts to her daughter singing: “Sometimes I think it would be better if I was dead. If you have nobody who understands.” Mrs. Maurrant seems to recognize a blemish in her character, for the line demonstrates that she knows her affair with Mr. Sankey is amoral. But


11 Ibid., 60.

12 Ibid., 61.
she does not seem to recognize that Rose understands her and even wishes there was something she could do to help her mother. Reversal occurs at the very same moment. Everything has turned out differently from what she expected. Mrs. Maurrant realizes that she never succeeded in being happy in this extramarital affair and expresses her hopelessness about her own life. However, she has hopes for her children’s future. She has suffered and obtained new insights about her struggles, so her son is perhaps her last hope for a better life. Willie represents the only perspective that things will be different in the future, as she sings in “A Boy Like You.”

After Mrs. Maurrant commits her *hamartia* onstage, welcoming Mr. Sankey up to the apartment, Mr. Maurrant, in a fit of rage, fires his gun at Mr. Sankey and ends up murdering his wife in the process. The libretto reveals that Mr. Maurrant is an angry and jealous man who states clearly what he believes (“Let Things Be Like They Always Was”). Before the murder, Rose tells him that she had had dinner with her boss Mr. Easter and that he had walked her home. Mr. Maurrant reacts: “No married man ain’t gonna come nosin’ around my family, get me?” 13 Even if not referring to Mr. Sankey, the line demonstrates Mr. Maurrant’s anger. Moreover, during the “There Will Be Trouble” trio, when Mrs. Maurrant asks when he would be back from New Haven, Mr. Maurrant replies, “why are you anxious to know? . . . In case somebody came calling, huh?” 14 As a result, it is probable that he could be the kind of man who would kill. In addition, Mrs. Maurrant’s death is necessary because she disturbed moral order and must be punished. If she survived, she would have to live forever as the woman who was

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13 Ibid., 40.
14 Ibid., 60.
unfaithful to her husband. Death is the only way she can avoid it. Therefore, the tragic character’s demise is comprehensible inside the totality of the play.15

Finally, Street Scene can arise pity and fear. The former comes from Mrs. Maurrant’s disillusionment that she will never be happy, despite her optimism and attempt of joy through the affair with Mr. Sankey. Fear may come either from her weakness and adultery, or from Mr. Maurrant’s blind anger and jealousy. These are acts that happen in real life. Thus, Mrs. Maurrant’s saga evokes Aristotle’s main concepts of a tragic plot.

1.2. West Side Story

This musical’s first act concludes with the enactment of Tony and Maria’s hamartia (their plot to stop the rumble). The consequences make Tony suffer immediately after he interferes. As described before, his presence under the highway makes Bernardo taunt him, and Riff’s reaction to defend Tony leads to the rumble and ultimately to Riff’s and Bernardo’s deaths. When Tony realizes what just happened, he foresees how this will affect his relationship with Maria and, as the libretto suggests, he “raises his voice in an anguished cry” and shouts her name.16 Maria’s suffering takes place early in the second act, after she sings “I Feel Pretty.” Chino arrives and tells her about the rumble and Bernardo’s death. Maria does not believe the rumble happened (which also demonstrates her blind faith that Tony could stop it, indicating once more a certain ignorance and naivety in the lover’s hamartia). Her pain arises as she calls

15 We see that Mr. Maurrant regrets the act later. But the musical does not feature enough elements that show him as a good person who was just trying to prevent another bad thing from happening or that he was actually aiming at happiness. Neither do we find elements that reveal whether he did that in full knowledge or not (he says that he had a wall inside of him he never could break through). With that, he fails to acquire the status of tragic character.

Chino a liar and prays: “please make it not be true . . . I will do anything: make me die.”\(^{17}\)

Tony’s arrival into her bedroom at this moment alleviates their suffering, for they are finally reunited.

However, even if their love proves to assuage their pain, after having gone through disastrous events they know that they have reached the contrary of what they were aiming at with their *hamartia*. Tony explains to Maria that the boys all rebelled against each other in the heat of the moment, marking the protagonists’ reversal. Recognition also occurs during this first scene in act two, during the song “Somewhere.” As they dream of a place where they can be free, the ballet shows they have learned that the gangs’ rivalry thwarts their happiness. We see their dream transformed into a nightmare, and the war between the Jets and the Sharks separating them. It confirms that they do know they cannot and will not end up together. The directions in the libretto inform that they even try to stop the rumble—their *hamartia*—one more time: “Maria tries to reach Bernardo, Tony tries to stop Riff.”\(^{18}\) It is, therefore, recognition of their own deeds. They understand their love is connected to Riff and Bernardo’s death. Moreover, the libretto indicates that after the chaos, “With a blind refusal to face what they know must be, they reassure each other” and sing “hold my hand and we’re halfway there. Hold my hand and I’ll take you there someday, somehow, somewhere!”\(^{19}\) That is the moment they realize their idealization that everything was perfect was naive. It is, too, recognition of enmity. Tony and Maria learn they cannot stop hate and rivalry between their respective ethnic groups. The song and ballet “Somewhere” represents a thought recognition, which develops in their minds and

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 199.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 202.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
imagination. Although they have reached some awareness of their situation, they still hope their relationship will survive.

The denouement begins in Act 2, Scene 3. Tony leaves the bedroom telling Maria he is going to ask Doc to help with money, and they should meet again at the drugstore, presumably to elope. The events lead Tony and Maria to bad luck after the songs “A Boy Like That” and “I Have a Love.” Police Officer Schrank arrives at Maria and Anita’s apartment to question Maria about the previous night. Unable to leave the place and also because she intends to lie to the officer, Maria asks Anita to go to the drugstore and tell Tony “to hold it for [her] till she come[s].”\(^{20}\) These two songs prove pivotal to the plot. Through them, Maria tries to convince Anita of her love for Tony.\(^{21}\) Only after that can Anita realize Maria’s candor and try to help her friend. At the drugstore, Scene 4, after being insulted and almost raped, Anita, in anger, falsely reports that Chino shot Maria. She represents the messenger in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Because he stops by a plague-stricken house, he fails to deliver the letter to Romeo who—ignorant of Juliet and the Friar’s plan—commits suicide. If Anita had not lied, Tony would not have run into the streets where Chino found him.

Two points support the probability of Tony’s death. In the last scene, Chino has a gun and intentionally wants to shoot Tony to avenge Bernardo’s murder. In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Romeo kills Paris (who was intended to marry Juliet). Because Tony never kills Chino, the tragic character’s death becomes imminent. The necessity of Romeo’s death occurs after he sees Juliet under the drug’s effect and believes that she has died. Tony, on the other hand, gets to see Maria alive and hugs her before Chino shoots. Moreover, the “Somewhere” ballet foreshadows that the

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 215.

protagonists will not be together forever. It is likely then that one or both will die, despite the characters’ hopes. Necessity in *West Side Story*, like in *Street Scene*, unfolds according to Aristotle’s theory. Like Mrs. Maurrant, Tony has disturbed moral order by killing Bernardo and must be punished. Tony’s death is comprehensible within the entire plot. A good man looking for happiness, but whose actions and circumstances leads to his death.  

The last scene, especially Maria’s final monologue generates pity and fear. Pity results from their naive belief that they would survive the gang warfare. When Tony dies at the end, we are as hopeless as Maria. Her crying over Tony’s body and refusal to allow the police officer to touch Tony are so intense that we may feel empathy and compassion for her. Moreover, we understand that the only reason tragedy occurred was due to a fallibility that could occur to anyone in that situation. Maria affirms that Tony died because hate motivated both gangs. With that, she makes all the other characters understand their mistake and reach a new understanding, which causes the Jets and the Sharks unite to carry Tony’s body offstage. Not surprisingly, the musical is not called “Tony and Maria” (as with *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*), but *West Side Story* because tragedy, hate, and death changed not only the tragic characters, but also several young gang members in this Manhattan community. This idea that a whole community changes after the main characters suffer—not necessarily because of death— is common in musical theater. The same happens in *Porgy and Bess*, *Into the Woods*, and *Rent*, for example.

### 1.3. *Sweeney Todd*

The tragic character in this musical commits three *hamartiai*, which contribute to his downfall. However, only the first and the third precipitate suffering. His intention with the first

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hamartia (to kill Judge Turpin) fails at the end of the first act, leading to some frustration. It leads to the decision of taking the second hamartia (to kill other men until he gets a chance with the Judge again). He succeeds in enacting this one, but it produces no suffering. Todd executes the third hamartia in ignorance. Having killed his customers without regret, he has no problem in killing the beggar woman, unaware that she is his wife, which produces his suffering.

The resulting pain from his first hamartia—the attempt to kill the Judge in revenge—occurs in “Epiphany.” Todd came back to London to kill Judge Turpin and to be reunited with his daughter and wife. Not being able to accomplish it, he expresses his suffering twice in the song, using the same melody: “And I’ll never see Johanna. No I’ll never hug my girl to me” and moments later “And my Lucy lies in ashes. And I’ll never see my girl again.”23 The contrasting texture and tempo compared to other parts of the song highlight his pain. But besides that, with this song Todd reaches reversal and recognition. Everything he expected with his actions goes awry, and the opposite occurs from what he had planned: the Judge is alive, and Lucy and Johanna have not returned to him. He acquires recognition: “there are two kinds of men and only two. There’s the one staying put in his proper place and the one with his foot in the other one’s face.”24 Thereby he reaches both self-awareness—realizing he can be even more revengeful than before—and recognition of other men’s deeds: no man is good and all deserve to die. These new insights explain why he commits a second hamartia, that is, to kill other men. By asserting his agony with the lines above, we see he has learned that reuniting with Lucy and Johanna seems impossible now, so he allows his thirst for revenge to grow and become irrational. In one single song, reversal and recognition from his first hamartia take place in one of the richest moments in


24 Ibid., 101.
the musical, and he affirms his second *hamartia*. All these events play a part in Todd’s final ruin.\(^{25}\)

Pain ensues from the third *hamartia* already part of what Aristotle would call denouement. After the act of killing the Beggar Woman, Todd finally succeeds in executing his first *hamartia* and kills the Judge. When he is about to kill a disguised Johanna (almost a fourth *hamartia*), the script indicates that, “the factory whistle blows and Mrs. Lovett is heard screaming “Die! Die!” from the bakehouse below.”\(^{26}\) These events distract Todd for a second, and Johanna manages to escape. When “light comes up on the bakehouse,”\(^{27}\) Todd’s change of luck—and therefore the denouement section of the plot—begins. His understanding that the Beggar Woman was his wife Lucy indicates not only recognition of identity, but also recognition of someone else’s deeds. He realizes it all happened because Mrs. Lovett lied to him about Lucy’s death. Such awareness arouses suffering again, but now greater than before because Todd learns of his ignorance of some facts. “Oh, my God, Lucy, what have I done?”\(^{28}\) he cries as Mrs. Lovett tries to give excuses for her lies. He then experienced reversal once more. In “Epiphany” he believed the contrary of what he expected had occurred and he would not see Lucy again. In the final scene, he learns everything could have been different, and his previous suffering was unnecessary since she was, in fact, alive. Finally, Todd’s ignorance of the facts does not permit him to free himself from culpability. At the last scene of the musical, Todd is not so different

\(^{25}\) On a discussion of how “Epiphany” represents Todd’s madness, see Judith Schlesinger, “Psychology, Evil, and *Sweeney Todd*,” in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publications, 2000), 125–41. She discusses whether Todd’s intentions are conscious or not, relating them to insanity and to the psychological terms that legal procedures usually employ.

\(^{26}\) Wheeler and Sondheim, 196.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 198.
from Electra. By the end of Sophocles’ Electra, the tragic character, “is alive and free of all her enemies, but her own moral being is corrupted by her own choice of vengeance, and this adds up to something like ‘tragic guilt.’”29 In the case of Sweeney Todd, this guilt is even worse, for not only did Todd kill all his enemies, but also his beloved Lucy.

Reversal and recognition lead to Todd’s death, and events from previous parts of the plot suggest that his downfall was probable and necessary. Probable because Tobias suspects Todd’s actions but is unaware of Mrs. Lovett’s. Tobias adores Mrs. Lovett. He finally has found the figure of a mother. In “Not While I’m Around,” he states he would kill anyone who could be dangerous to Mrs. Lovett, even if it were “a man wot was bad and wot might be luring [her] all unbeknownst into his evil deeds.”30 Todd’s death had necessarily to happen because the murder of the Beggar Woman caused bad luck. He never recognized the Beggar Woman was Lucy, and now after killing her, such recognition is too late, and Todd cannot have her forever. Alive he would have to live with the pain of having killed Lucy. Moreover, having killed many men, Lucy, and Mrs. Lovett, Sweeney Todd must be punished. A mentally disturbed Tobias performs the act, convinced that he is protecting Mrs. Lovett. Scholar Joanne Gordon claims that Todd “must die because he understands both what has been done to him and what he himself has wrought. He is not the arbitrary death of melodrama but the necessary death of tragedy.”31

The last song in Sweeney Todd arouses fear. As the entire company sings about Todd’s behavior and mysterious actions, they remind the audience that people like Todd are everywhere,


30 Wheeler and Sondheim, 173.

perhaps right in the theater, watching the musical. They sing: “No one can help. Nothing can hide you. Isn’t that Sweeney there beside you?”

Moments later, as marked in the libretto, they “point around the theater” shouting “there” several times, once more to remind the audience no one is free from feeling hate and perpetrating harmful acts. In other words, the fear Aristotle insists tragedy must arouse in the audience comes from what scholar Judith Schlesinger calls folie partagée, a sharing madness between the artist and the audience. Indeed, Sweeney Todd’s tragic character tells us and we finally realize that

Any one of us could be a Sweeney, confusing light and dark, good and evil, salvation and vengeance. Any one of us could start out naïve and end up murderous, convinced of our own rectitude. And any one of us could snap if the pain gets deep enough.

The fact that two of Todd’s hamartiai are conscious acts suppresses pity or empathy. He performs his revenge against Judge Turpin and murders his clients without ever expressing regret or any form of compassion towards his victims. Moreover, both his hate and obsession grow conspicuously stronger throughout the musical. By the time he kills the Beggar Woman, even if we have realized she is Lucy, our emotional reaction does not excite pity as Aristotle proposes tragedy ought to. However, even if the musical succeeds in arousing fear but not pity, it does not make Todd less of a tragic character. Conscious hamartiai prevent pity, but still they are part of the aesthetic of the genre as described in Aristotle’s Poetics. In addition, Sweeney Todd’s plot features all the Aristotelian devices (hamartia, recognition, and reversal) leading the tragic character to suffering and ultimately death.

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32 Wheeler and Sondheim, 203.

33 Ibid.

1.4. Miss Saigon

Like Tony and Maria in *West Side Story*, Kim believes in love and trusts it so intensively that her *hamartia*—waiting for Chris’s return—does not make her suffer and agonize for long. The song “Please” features Kim’s only assertion that three years of waiting for Chris caused some pain. She sings, “Yes. Yes I know. I know how pain can grow when the rock you hold onto is a love miles away.”35 However, John tells her that Chris is in town with him and that they will meet at that day, raising Kim’s expectation that she finally will be reunited with Chris.

Reversal and recognition mark the beginning of the plot’s denouement with the song “Room 317.” In sung dialogue, Ellen welcomes Kim to her hotel bedroom and tells her that she is Chris’s wife. At this moment reversal and recognition occur simultaneously. This meeting establishes the start of Kim’s change of fortune. Reversal takes place as she realizes that precisely the opposite of what she hoped has occurred. She was sure for three years that Chris would return and they would live happily as husband and wife. Never did she consider the possibility of him marrying another woman. In addition, she expected that he would return and then take her to live in the United States. Having learned that Chris has another wife, Kim understands that she will not have the opportunity to pursue the American dream. Learning of Chris’s marriage makes her realize that her waiting was in vain. Thus, Chris and Ellen’s marriage reverses Kim’s saga and initiates her change of fortune.

Kim realizes that her son’s future has also changed. She understands she will not be able to go to the United States with Chris, and if she lives neither will Tam. This indicates that her death is necessary. She tries to persuade Ellen to take the boy with her. At this moment, she is consumed by the Engineer’s obsession for happiness in America and her realization that she lost

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her husband to another woman is no longer as important as her desire for her child to have the American dream. After Ellen refuses to “take a child from his mother,” Kim’s words display her line of thought. At the end of the song “Room 317,” Kim knows her death is the only outlet that will grant Tam a better life. At the moment Kim tells Ellen that Chris should come to her place that night, she has already decided to kill commit suicide.

Moreover, the song “Sacred Bird” reveals her recognition, conformism, and awareness of the necessity of her death. Moments before shooting herself, Kim affirms that she knows her sacrifice is inexorable and sings, “Spirits know when to fly when it’s time.” She tells Tam it is his turn to know his father’s love, and for him “to find [his] place, she has to leave [his] embrace.” Finally, she tells her son “for now you must move on,” an action she was never able to perform. The probability of her death stems from early in the musical play. In “This Money Is Yours,” she claims that she has had her “feel of pain” and would rather die instead of experiencing more. When she realizes the reversal of events thwarts her happiness, she kills herself.

Kim’s downfall results from the chain of events and her personality and beliefs. From her first appearance onstage we know she had been striving for happiness and in search of her dreams. With that, pity unfolds when everything goes awry. Indeed, aspects of her personality—obsession and stubbornness—may arouse fear, in the Aristotelian sense. Anyone may be victim of false hopes and a refusal to “move on” because of a fixation on a single goal. Miss Saigon fits

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36 Ibid., 22.
37 Ibid., 24.
38 Ibid., 25.
39 Ibid.
Aristotle’s premises of tragedy. The plot features hamartia, reversal, and recognition all culminating in the tragic character’s encounter with bad luck and ultimate suicide.

### 1.5. Passion

In *Passion* Fosca is not a tragic character. She realizes Giorgio is different from the other men at the outpost and, after she falls in love with him, she becomes aware of her actions with which she tries to show Giorgio that her love is true. I will demonstrate below that reversal and recognition lead to Giorgio’s bad luck and not hers even if she dies at the end. Therefore, the hamartia explained in the previous chapter—Giorgio’s visit to Fosca after having decided that nothing would happen between them since he was in love with Clara—makes him suffer. In this bedroom scene, Giorgio writes the letter to which Fosca sings the words “I Wish I Could Forget You”. She thus makes him see her point of view about his feelings. His suffering appears in scene 9 during their meeting on the mountainside. He disapproves of Fosca’s attitudes, declaring that her behavior to be not typical of someone who is in love, but of someone who pursues incessantly. By the time he sings “Is This What You Call Love?,” he has understood where his good intentions have led him. He realizes he is trapped: Fosca’s cousin and the doctor believe Giorgio should be in contact with her so that she might recover. He knows that doing so may make her even weaker, since she expresses her obsessive and tumultuous love, and he reacts stating clearly that he does not want her. He even refers to the letter from the hamartia scene. He sings, “I’m sorry that I fail to feel the way you wish me to feel.” In ignorance, believing he knows what love is, he sings to Fosca, “This is not love, just a need for possession.”

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Reversal and recognition occur when Giorgio realizes the events developed contrary to what he predicted and learns that Fosca’s love is more sincere than Clara’s. Fosca believes that Giorgio claims to be in love with Clara because she is probably a beautiful woman. Fosca makes her point when she says she would die for him, causing Giorgio to realize that Clara would never die for him. This happens in scene 11 when they are on the train. Sondheim’s song “Loving You” marks the beginning of denouement. Giorgio smiles back at her as they look at the moonlight from the train window, and this demonstrates he has reached a new understanding. He helps her with the blanket just as he had helped her before in the castle and in the rain, but now “he sees what she sees.”\textsuperscript{41} Denouement continues in scene 12 when Giorgio’s recognition occurs onstage as he learns about Clara’s love. He invites her to elope and her reaction, denial, and conformism all tell him that Clara’s love is different than Fosca’s. In addition, he is surprised when Clara wonders if he would love her so intensely were she not married. Although he answers in the affirmative, Clara’s comment shows that she too has questioned herself about their love. Later, in Clara’s farewell letter, she sings that Giorgio has changed. The final days they had spent together followed Fosca’s “Loving You.” Indeed, Giorgio could not keep her off his mind, and that made Clara question if he was the same man with whom she had previously been happy. The confirmation of his new awareness appears in a reprise of “Is This What You Call Love?” Now, Giorgio poses the question to Clara. Before he was mad with Fosca’s pursuit and insistence, now he is mad with Clara’s “logical and sensible practical arrangement.”\textsuperscript{42}


\textsuperscript{42} Lapine and Sondheim, 116.
Certainly, he has learned what love is, and agrees more with Fosca’s conception than with Clara’s. These lines below reflect his growth:

GIORGIO. Love isn’t so convenient. Love isn’t something scheduled in advance, not something guaranteed you need for fear it may pass you by. You have to take a chance, you can’t just try it out. What’s love unless it’s unconditional?  

Clara, too, mentions that she would die because of her love for Giorgio at the very beginning of the musical. “I’m so happy, I’m afraid I’ll die here in your arms,” she sings in “Happiness.” The fact that she does not prove her love is as passionate and deep as Fosca’s leads to Giorgio’s reversal. “Loving You” marks the beginning of Giorgio’s change of luck, reversal, and initial recognition. The reprise of “Is This What You Call Love?” represents his recognition.

Giorgio’s saga proves that bad luck is probable and necessary. During his visit to Fosca in scene 7—his *hamartia*—Giorgio wrote the letter mentioned above and signed it. At the end of the musical, he cannot prove that they were Fosca’s words and those were not his intentions. In fact, now that he has seen their love as true, he does not want to absolve himself from the blame of having written the letter. Consequently, an offended Colonel, Fosca’s cousin, sends Giorgio to another outpost. Giorgio goes to say goodbye to Fosca as he sings about his recognition, “No One Has Ever Loved Me,” and together they realize they learned about their love too late. Fosca sings, “All this happiness, coming when there’s so little time. To much happiness, more than I can bare.” This last line foreshadows that she will die. Too much love would be more than her poor health could take. Moreover, in their subsequent dialogue, as they are about to sleep together, Giorgio hesitates saying, “We can’t.” He knows about her frail condition, but she

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 1.

45 Ibid., 123.
answers back saying that “to die loved is to have lived,” suggesting that after feeling true love in return, she will be ready for death. In addition, the duel that the colonel proposes after finding out about the letter, too, leads to bad luck. Although Giorgio knew that was the last time he would see Fosca (because he had been transferred to another outpost), his injury forces him to stay in the hospital, and only when he recovers does he learn that Fosca has died.

The doctor plays a crucial role in Passion. He is responsible for Giorgio committing his hamartia. He claims that he can move Giorgio away from Fosca if he orders Giorgio to another outpost. Giorgio paid Fosca a visit only because the doctor asked him. Moreover, he tells Fosca that Giorgio is leaving the outpost for forty days, which makes her follow him in the train scene that leads to Giorgio’s recognition. For that reason, the doctor acquires the same dominance of the situation as the nurse does in Sophocles’ Hippolytus. In the Greek tragedy, the nurse’s actions toward Hippolytus and Phaedra makes her a fundamental agent in accomplishing Aphrodite’s scheme, even if she is not aware of the goddess’s intentions toward the hero. In Passion, the doctor does not know about Giorgio’s relationship with Clara, let alone the changes that the tragic character experiences because of his actions, but contributes to Giorgio’s clash with bad luck.

Fosca’s final letter, which Giorgio reads after her death, helps to arouse pity. After spending one night in Giorgio’s company, she finally feels love in return and wants to experience  

46 Ibid.

47 Scholar Martin Gottfried argues that tragedy occurs at this moment of the musical, after Giorgio and Fosca sing about what they learned from one another and her statement that she will die of love. Gottfried believes that if the curtain went down at the end of this scene, the musical would have a more compelling ending. In addition, he does not believe that Giorgio’s new insights form a convincing “conclusion to high tragedy.” Martin Gottfried, Sondheim, 2nd ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 187–94.

48 By the same token, Phaedra in Hippolytus leaves a written incrimination of rape against the hero. This letter affects Hippolytus’ luck just like Fosca’s letter “I Wish I Could Forget You” (although intended to sound like those were Giorgio’s words) affects Giorgio’s luck.
this emotion. She writes and sings as Giorgio reads, “I now can leave with what I never knew: I’m someone to be loved.” Pity comes from her words “I want to live. Now I want to live, just from being loved.” But as Giorgio reads the letter, we already know she died a couple of days after writing these words. Empathy comes from knowing that Giorgio learned about Fosca’s true love too late in his saga. When the company sings “how could I ever wish you away? I see now I was blind” reinforces Giorgio’s belated insight.

The ending of Passion demonstrates the fine line between tragedy and tragicomedy. Suffering and death notwithstanding, Fosca ends the musical singing metadiegetically inside Giorgio’s mind about her revelations and new discovery. Although they will not have the opportunity of experiencing what he learned after some suffering, he will presumably live the rest of his life with her presence in his mind and heart. Her words comfort Giorgio and assure him that her love will live in him. However, Passion displays aspects of tragedy since “tragedy cannot be judged purely by what we are left with at the end.” A good and virtuous man faced a difficult time, unaware that his own actions caused him certain anguish. He suffers in order to understand what love is and whose love was true; he learns about Fosca’s, Clara’s, and his own capacity to love. But Fosca dies after his realization. Aristotle’s concepts do not appear just at the end of the musical, after Fosca’s death and Giorgio’s understanding that he has leaned about her love too late. “Tragedy should not depend for its ultimate effect on a state of incurable suffering,

49 Lapine and Sondheim, 130.
50 Ibid., 129.
51 Ibid., 130.
but rather on the dramatic exhibition of the conditions from which such states can emerge."\(^{53}\)

This describes what happens with Giorgio in *Passion*.

Thus, the five musicals under consideration contain complex plots with a particular moment (either a dialogue or a song) that separates, in Aristotle’s terms, complication from denouement. These musicals follow Aristotle’s theory of tragedy by featuring reversal and recognition in the tragic character’s saga, and probability and necessity in his or her final clash with bad luck. In addition, these musicals’ final scenes arouse pity and fear (*Sweeney Todd* is the exception, for it produces only fear). We cannot forget that reversal and recognition may also appear in comedy or any other theatrical genre. But in these musical theater works, they lead to bad luck, entailing suffering and death.

### 2. Reversal/Recognition Moments in Songs and Underscoring

Reversal and recognition represent the climactic moments in plot development. Like with *hamartia*, the musical settings in these five musicals follow the norms and common practices of musical theater. In other words, song emplotment in these musicals does not appear in a way that would distinguish them from other examples of the genre. But it certainly enhances the tragic agenda. In this section, I investigate how these musicals’ composers set the tragic characters’ reversal and recognition to music. *Street Scene* and *Sweeney Todd* make use of motifs that reveal recognition and reversal in their plots’ climax. *West Side Story, Miss Saigon*, and *Passion* feature a new song that brings musical material from previous parts of the score to the reversal/recognition moment.

The interaction between the tragic characters and the orchestra proves to be indispensable in intensifying the tragic effect in reversal/recognition moments. In his book *The Musical as

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 138.
**Drama**, Scott McMillin writes that “the orchestra is the infallible element of a musical, the agent that always knows what is coming and never misunderstands a character or a turn of the plot.”\(^{54}\) In other words, the use of motifs or the emplotment of a new song in the reversal/recognition moment refer back to previous parts of the plot and/or of the score, and the orchestra makes use of “its underscoring ability to link the segments together.”\(^{55}\)

In *Street Scene*, the use of a motif establishes reversal of facts and recognition. After her aria “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” Mrs. Maurrant sings only once more in the first act. During “Wrapped in Ribbon and Tied in a Bow,” she sings the same melody as everyone else, for she shares optimism and joy with her neighbors. She does not sing again until the beginning of denouement in the second act. Her first sung phrase then is a variation from her theme introduced previously in her aria. It becomes the motif to which she sings “I was up all night with a poor young mother / I tried to calm her troubled mind and ease her pain” (see Example 2.1). This provides the introduction to the trio “There Will Be Trouble,” which marks Mrs. Maurrant’s reversal and recognition moment.

Example 2.1. Mrs. Maurrant’s motif

![Musical notation]

The motif links her dreams and aspirations, which she had introduced in her aria, to her realization that she has reached the opposite of what she hoped for in her marriage. In the aria “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” Mrs. Maurrant alluded to her unhappy marriage, but concluded hopefully:

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\(^{55}\) Ibid., 139.
MRS. MAURRANT. Oh, on the day that we were married
I took a flower from my bouquet
And I pressed it in a book and put the book away.

Sometimes now I go and take a look
The flower’s dry, the perfume’s gone,
The petals all turned gray.
Oh dream of love! Should love turn out that way?
Should love turn out that way?

I don’t know – it looks like something awful happens
In the kitchens where women wash their dishes
Days turn to months – months turn to years,
The greasy soap-suds drown our wishes.

There’s got to be a little happiness somewhere,
Some hand to touch that’s warm and kind!
And there must be two smiling eyes somewhere
That will smile back into mine.

I never could believe
That life was meant to be all dull and gray.
I always will believe
There’ll be a brighter day! 56

In the trio, Mrs. Maurrant realizes that this someone kind, those smiling eyes, and the bright day never came, and she suffers. When she addresses her husband singing “What else have I been doing all these years?,” the orchestral accompaniment confirms her aria’s motif, suggesting that all these years she has been hoping for happiness. When Mr. and Mrs. Maurrant and Rose sing simultaneously, Mrs. Maurrant sings: “You’ve got no right to talk to me like that. I’ve always tried to make a home for you. I’ve always tried to do my best.” 57 Her suffering for understanding the reversal of facts adds slight variations to the motif. She alters the motif’s rhythm, sings blue notes (D natural and G-flat in the A-flat key), in an expanded range. Rose’s

56 Rice and Hughes, 15–16.
57 Ibid., 60.
melody at this moment, on the other hand, seems close to her mother’s original “Somehow I Never Could Believe.” Rose uses it to try to convince her father about her mother’s aspirations. By the end of this trio, when Mr. Maurrant leaves, this motif has bridged Mrs. Maurrant’s hopes from her first aria at beginning of the musical to her reversal and recognition moment.

After the trio, the orchestra continues to emphasize Mrs. Maurrant’s reversal and recognition moment by altering her motif in underscoring and orchestration. The measures when she sings, “I tried to be a good wife to him but he never seemed to care” mirrors the beginning of “Somehow I Never Could Believe.” In the aria, she sings the words “somehow I never could believe” in syncopation. In the reversal scene, Weill reverses the rhythm and has her sing in eight notes, followed by that same syncopation to the words “I tried to be a good wife.” Moreover, one part of her motif repeats three times with different instruments during the conversation between Mrs. Maurrant and Rose about Mr. Sankey coming around less often. Different woodwind instruments play the same part of the theme in succession, and Weill transposes the motif each time. They seem to suggest Mrs. Maurrant’s thwarted dreams. Finally, just as her words clearly depict her hopelessness, “Sometimes I think it would be better if I was dead. If you have nobody who understands,” the strings play the motif again. The music accompanying the words “if I was dead” is the only part of this section that presents a new rhythmic transformation to the motif. What before was two sixteenth notes plus two eight notes (see m. 2 in Example 2.1 above), Weill changes to a single eighth note followed by four sixteenth notes. This rhythmic alteration for the words “if I was dead” reinforces the probability of Mrs. Maurrant’s death, underpinning her reversal of fortune in this scene.

58 Ibid., 61.
Similarly, in *Sweeney Todd*, reversal and recognition occur through a motif played by the orchestra. Denouement in this musical starts with Todd going to the bakehouse having heard Mrs. Lovett’s screaming “Die, die.” Once he turns the Beggar Woman’s body around and for the first time looks directly into her face, he recognizes that she is Lucy. Realization appears in his words as he remembers what she said right before the murder, “Don’t I know you? She said…” he utters. Music reflects the realization as the orchestra plays the Beggar Woman’s chromatic theme in 12/8, one that had accompanied her since her first appearance onstage when she was begging for alms. The same theme later appeared in the Act I minuet during the party scene where Lucy is raped. In this recognition scene, Sondheim sets the theme to a slower tempo and longer note values, now that Todd has more time than before to study the woman’s face. Even as Mrs. Lovett sings her excuses for not telling the truth, the accompaniment repeats the Beggar Woman’s theme, highlighting Todd’s recognition. Like it happened in “My Friends,” the orchestral accompaniment depicts only Todd’s state of mind, suggesting that he does not even hear Mrs. Lovett’s reasons for lying. The orchestra interrupts the theme only when Todd starts waltzing Mrs. Lovett toward the oven. The Beggar Woman’s motif in *Sweeney Todd* certifies recognition of identity and reversal of fortune, for Todd learns that he will never see Lucy again.

A new song may indicate reversal and recognition in the tragic character’s saga. The song “Somewhere,” previously echoed at the end of “Tonight,” represents Tony and Maria’s recognition of their situation and knowledge that circumstances ended up contrary to what they had hoped. At the beginning of the ballet sequence, Tony sings that “there must be a place we can feel we’re free.” As the scherzo develops in the orchestra, Tony and Maria see Manhattan’s

59 Wheeler and Sondheim, 197.

60 Laurents and Sondheim, 201.
West side without violence and gang rivalry, projecting their friends in a peaceful area where everyone lives in harmony. The music to which they walk and dance emphasizes perfect fifths and relegate the tritone to appoggiaturas. In subsequent passages of the scherzo, the fifth appears without the tritone at all. Bernstein’s score parallels Tony and Maria’s belief that they can stop the hostility between the gangs. Their dream climaxes as they dance accompanied by a girl singing “Somewhere.” They even manage to bring all their friends to the dance in what Bernstein called “Procession,” and everybody joins in the girl’s melody.

However, Riff and Bernardo reappear, and the rumble is reenacted in the section of the ballet called “Nightmare.” Bernstein employs the tritone and motives from “The Rumble” repeated by different instruments to symbolize the rivalry. As the texture and tension grow, the ballet depicts how Tony and Maria become aware that their love and relationship is strongly connected with the outcome of the rumble. The libretto reads, “Maria and Tony are once again separated from each other by the violent warring of the two sides.”61 The events in their own dream separate them, and they realize the probability that they may not prevail. However, even if the opposite of what they planned for happens, they still have hopes and sing the song’s main theme for the first time. Bernstein depicts their optimism in music by ending the song with the main theme in the oboe surrounded with perfect intervals of fourth and fifth in the strings. The tragic couple’s hamartia, reversal, and recognition, when set to music, become a dream-like idea—an escape from reality. “Somewhere” represents their dreams in this reversal and recognition scene just like “One Hand, One Heart” represents their dreams after deciding what later in the show reveals itself to be their hamartia.

61 Ibid., 202.
In *Miss Saigon*, reversal and recognition occur in the song “Room 317.” In her book *The Megamusical*, musicologist Jessica Sternfeld proposes that in this type of Broadway musical theater, a “combination of set of songs, linking transitional material, and recitative-like material” forms the musical score. “Room 317” in *Miss Saigon* fits the megamusical aesthetic as it merges one motif previously introduced with elements from an act-one song. Schönberg depicts Ellen in the orchestra (Chris’s new wife) through the motif below:

Example 2.2. Ellen’s motif

![Example 2.2. Ellen’s motif](image)

It first appears early in act two, at the end of “The Revelation,” after John tells Chris he has found out that Kim is alive and has given birth to his child. They decide to go and meet Kim in Vietnam, but before going Chris needs to let his new wife know about Kim. Exactly under the word “know” the orchestra introduces her motif, which will also open Ellen’s own song “Now That I’ve Seen Her.” “Room 317” begins with this motif in the woodwinds. Both women sing to this same motif and then develop it into a new melody that they share. Not only does Kim reach self-awareness with this song, but so does Ellen who learns how Kim’s desperation will affect her own life.

When Kim learns the truth—that Ellen is married to Chris—the orchestra comes to a sudden halt as Kim looks indignant. The orchestra breaks the silence by playing the main theme

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63 A piano-vocal score to *Miss Saigon* has never been published. The songs in the vocal highlights collection do not include “The Revelation” or “Room 317.” The song “Now That I’ve Seen Her” starts out in the chorus in this publication, omitting the orchestra’s and Ellen’s opening lines. I transcribed the motif from the recording.
from the act-one song “This Is the Hour.” Kim employs the same music with which she confronted Thuy in act one to face Ellen, who sings this theme lightly, accompanied by a solo clarinet. The women return to Ellen’s motif, but when Kim sings “you must take Tam with you,” Ellen refuses, and Kim understands that if she lives, Tam will never have a better life in the United States. Kim’s final words to Ellen, when she has already realized the reversal of facts and the necessity of her death, are accompanied by music that resembles the murder of Thuy in “This Is the Hour.” The orchestration features tremolos in the strings, brass instruments highlight the end of Kim’s phrases, and the bass drum grows in dynamics accompanying each of her phrases. The reference to “This Is the Hour” in “Room 317” indicates that indeed Kim is willing to protect her son and give anything—even her own life—to help him. Musical elements in “Room 317” may not be completely new at this juncture in the musical, but the way Schönberg combines them sets the stage for reversal and recognition.

In Passion, Giorgio listens attentively to Fosca only when she breaks into song. But it is not until “Loving You” that Giorgio begins to understand her plight, evincing his change of luck. On one hand, this song introduces new music. When Fosca succeeds in explaining her love and feelings to Giorgio, she sings minor arpeggios. On the other hand, the main motif of the show (see Example 1.1 above), which Sondheim said represents the lovers’ mood, reappears. Although it is more prominent in the accompaniment than in the character’s part, Sondheim uses the theme to contrast with the arpeggiated theme.

Two aspects from this song suggest that it signals a pivotal moment in the musical. Fosca interrupts the minor chord arpeggios with the “love mood” motif. To this motif she sings, “This is why I live. You are why I live.” In one of the other two songs in which she sang this motif, “I

64 Stephen Sondheim and Mark Eden Horowitz, Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 34.
Read,” Fosca had told Giorgio that reading was the only reason she lived, her passion. Now her love for him gives purpose to her life, so Sondheim recalls the same theme. Second, Sondheim uses the song to assert what will lead to Giorgio’s recognition. Fosca sings, “I will live, and I would die for you.” By employing the new theme (minor arpeggios), Sondheim musically reveals that this song and its message have a deeper meaning. After Fosca sings it, Giorgio understands the opposite of what he expected and realizes that Clara’s love for him is not as strong as Fosca’s. After their dialogue, when Giorgio realizes—according to the libretto—“the truth of his situation,” he looks at her and smiles as the lights fade to dark.

In scene 13, the reprise of “Is This What You Call Love?” allows Giorgio to express his recognition in song. It follows Richard Kislan’s premises of an effective reprise. First, it adds something new to the song, not just repeating previous music.” Sondheim repeats the music, but changes the lyrics, which expresses Giorgio’s new level of understanding. The same music characterizes his resentment: with the same material he accosted Fosca at the mountainside, now he confronts Clara after her “Farewell Letter,” which confirms his recognition. Second, it is brief. By this point of the musical, Giorgio’s comprehension that Fosca’s love for him is true (and Clara’s is not) proves to be more important than his indignation toward Clara. Therefore, the song that represents his outrage need not be reprised in toto. It functions as the protagonist’s reversal and recognition.

The protagonists’ change of fortune in these five musicals involves both reversal and recognition. The musicals feature at least one song in which the tragic character reaches a new

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65 Lapine and Sondheim, 101.

66 Ibid.

level of understanding and realizes that the opposite of his/her expectations has occurred. Three of them introduce a new song. Passion, besides “Loving You,” features a reprise of “Is This What You Call Love?” Miss Saigon’s song in the reversal and recognition moment (“Room 317”) is formed by musical elements from previous numbers. West Side Story introduces the song “Somewhere” with a musical accompaniment to a ballet that hints at previous musical materials. The other two, composed to a great extent in an operatic fashion, focus attention on reversal, recognition, and denouement through musical motifs. Mrs. Maurrant reaches this new point in the storyline accompanied by her motif from the aria “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” and Todd with the Beggar Woman’s motif. Thus, “There Will Be Trouble,” “Somewhere,” the first part of Sweeney Todd’s “Final Scene,” “Room 317,” and “Loving You” all share the same musico-dramatic function. Even if the techniques are common practice in musical theater, the composers’ choice to use music for these moments indeed intensifies tragedy.

3. The Tragic Character’s Clash with Bad Luck in Songs and Under scoring

The final scene of a Broadway musical usually features music that was previously heard in the show. My goal in this section is to demonstrate that these five musicals’ final moments are always somehow musically linked to previous moments of the show. I argued above that the tragic character’s final mishap is comprehensible within the totality of the plot. Now I aim to show that the music that accompanies their downfall, too, is comprehensible within the totality of the score. I investigate whether the clash with bad luck relates musically to one of the Aristotle’s concepts (hamartia, reversal, or recognition) or to any other part of the musical. If the latter is the case, I explore why composers musically link moments that are not hamartia, reversal, or
recognition scenes to the clash with bad luck and examine how such a reference enhances or weakens the tragedy.

In *Street Scene* Weill reuses music from the reversal/recognition scene to accompany the tragic character’s clash with bad luck. In Mrs. Maurrant’s last scene, Rose sees her fatally wounded mother close to death being carried in a stretcher. Mrs. Maurrant does not die onstage, however. We learn about her death later when Rose tells her father, “She never opened her eyes again.”68 Nevertheless, the music that accompanies Mrs. Maurrant’s last moment onstage and her last words “Ah Rose” reflects her downfall. Weill employs Mrs. Maurrant’s motif (see Example 2.1 above) from the trio “There Will Be Trouble” (her confrontation with her husband in Act II, Scene 1). By reusing the motif at the beginning of the trio (when she suffers for not having a happy marital life) and in Mrs. Maurrant’s last moment on stage right before her death, the composer successfully links suffering to bad luck. As the motif fades by a descending semitone, so do Mrs. Maurrant’s expectations, and she weakly murmurs her daughter’s name. By this point, Mrs. Maurrant knows that death is near.69

In *West Side Story*, Tony and Maria’s tragic ending refers musically to their reversal and recognition song. After Chino shoots Tony, the tragic characters comfort each other talking about a better and happier place for them. Maria first breaks into a reprise of “Somewhere” without the orchestra. Tony joins, but his voice hesitates, and he passes away as she sings one of the song’s main motifs and the word “someday.” The orchestra enters only after his death, as

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68 Rice and Hughes, 87.

Maria rests Tony’s body on the ground. Composer Leonard Bernstein tried to write a number at this juncture, but failed to find an appropriate musical expression:

[The scene] cries out for music. I tried to set it very bitterly, understated, swift. I tried giving all the material to the orchestra and having [Maria] sing an obligato throughout. I tried a version that sounds just like a Puccini aria, which we really did not need. I never got past six bars with it. I made a difficult, painful but surgically clean decision not to set it at all.  

As director Scott Miller suggests, after Tony dies in her hands, Maria is dead inside. Tony was her music, “she did not sing until she met Tony, and now he is dead,” so she does not break into song or dance to express her pain. In the “Somewhere” ballet, during their reversal and recognition scene, the song had ended in perfect consonance, even though the tritone—symbolizing the gangs’ rivalry—had been present in the “Nightmare” sequence. Now, after Tony has been tragically killed, the strings still play a C-major chord, but Bernstein adds an F-sharp in the bass, forming an unresolved tritone as the curtain falls. As Jets and Sharks join to carry Tony’s body away, the orchestra plays “Somewhere” in counterpoint between different instruments, confirming that maybe what Tony and Maria had dreamed was impossible. The tritone represents the inevitability of tragedy given the ethnic tensions and gang warfare.

Sweeney Todd’s clash with disaster also features a song reprise. However, this song does not refer to the hamartia or reversal/recognition scenes. After waltzing Mrs. Lovett into the oven, Todd returns to Lucy’s body, kneels, holds her head, and reprises “The Barber and His

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72 The theme from “I Have a Love” also appears in counterpoint at this moment, referring to Maria’s love for Tony.
“Wife” from when he told his story to Anthony in Act I, Scene 1. This cyclic connection of the clash with bad luck to such an early scene of the musical enhances the tragedy because it shows the tragic character’s understanding that it was his own choices that led to his demise. Not only does the reprise of “The Barber and His Wife” convey once more the idea that Benjamin Barker was not an evil, revengeful man, but it also reflects Todd’s understanding that becoming such a man was a mistake.

Sondheim distinguishes the different renditions of the song in two ways. First, he makes Todd sing a larger interval to the word “naïve” (an octave, compared to the previous major second) when he shrugs and refers to himself. Maybe Benjamin Barker had been naïve for having lost his wife to the Judge, but Sweeny Todd ends up being more naïve than Barker, since he had believed Mrs. Lovett’s lie and remained ignorant that his beautiful wife had indeed lived.

In addition, the length of the reprise marks another difference. In Act I, Scene 1, after Todd sings “The Barber and His Wife,” the orchestra maintains the song’s accompaniment during Todd and Anthony’s dialogue. As Tobias appears behind Todd in the final scene, however, the orchestra repeats the song’s accompaniment for only four measures, and no underscoring follows. Neither Todd’s suffering over Lucy’s body nor Tobias’s murder of Todd feature music. Sondheim purposely wanted underscoring to play an important role in Sweeney Todd. In every scene, it creates the appropriate atmosphere, similar to the soundtrack of a horror film. The lack of underscoring after the reprise of “The Barber and His Wife” dramatizes Todd’s realization that his end is near after finding bad luck. All of the characters who Todd wanted to murder are dead, and Benjamin Barker is aware that he will never see Johanna and Lucy again. The tragic character has no reason to live. Stephen Banfield reminds us that this final scene “remained unsung and unplayed simply because Sondheim did not have time to add music before the
production opened. Yet the pacing, although no longer musical, let alone vocal, is wonderful, and the scene is tremendously effective. . . . *Sweeney Todd* demonstrates the dramatic potency and rightness of music’s self-denial . . . just as Maria’s final speech does in *West Side Story.*”

Indeed, silence creates a greater dramatic effect than music for the tragic denouement.

In *Miss Saigon* Schönberg reuses music from other moments of the musical for the tragic character’s clash with bad luck. Similar to *Sweeney Todd,* none of these moments is either the *hamartia* song (“I Still Believe”) or the reversal/recognition song (“Room 317”). Kim’s final song, “Sacred Bird,” just like “Room 317,” is a new song, but which comprises motifs from previous parts of the musical. Schönberg introduces a new theme at the very beginning of the song as Kim sings about her sacrifice to save her son. But after that, Schönberg recalls five previous themes from other songs in the score. Kim bids her son farewell with a reprise of “I’d Give My Life for You.” As Kim prays and leaves Tam waiting for Chris’s arrival, the flute and the harp repeat the theme from “The Ceremony,” which represents Kim’s culture, religion, and beliefs—everything that helped her survive this turbulent saga. She hides herself behind the curtain, so Tam does not see her suicide, and right before she shoots herself, the orchestra repeats the Engineer’s song “The American Dream.” After her reversal/recognition scene, Kim understood that she had to kill herself in order to give Tam a better future. Kim allowed this to become an obsession that surpassed her initial goal of reuniting with her husband. This reprise symbolizes that the Engineer’s obsession for the American dream had become Kim’s own. If she cannot have a life in the United States with Chris, she wants to make sure her son can. After she fires the gun and Chris arrives, the orchestra and Kim repeat “Sun and Moon,” their love song.

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74 I discuss this song and its reprise in chapter three as an example of a song that foreshadows tragedy.
from act I. Like Maria had repeated “Somewhere” \textit{a capella} in her clash with bad luck, Kim reprises “Sun and Moon” without orchestral accompaniment. The orchestra concludes the scene only after she dies. The curtain falls as the orchestra echoes the same tension it had created in “This Is the Hour” for the act I finale.

For the music to Giorgio’s clash with bad luck, Sondheim reprises parts of other songs from \textit{Passion}, including those from the \textit{hamartia} and reversal/recognition scenes. First, as Giorgio reads the colonel’s letter, he learns that Fosca has died. Sondheim recalls the theme Fosca had introduced herself through her piano playing in “First Letter” and which later accompanied her entrance onstage before “I Read” for the orchestra underscoring. When Giorgio breaks into song as he reads her final letter, he sings the minor chord arpeggios from “Loving You.” Similar to scene 11 (when Fosca followed Giorgio to the train station), this song informs Giorgio about Fosca’s love and how it makes her feel alive despite her weak physical health. As the libretto indicates, “Fosca’s voice quietly begins to join [Giorgio’s] from offstage”\footnote{Lapine and Sondheim, 128.} as he reads her final letter. Fosca had told him before, “You hear music, as do I,” whereas the others at the outpost, “they hear only drums.”\footnote{Ibid., 35.} Now, she creates such music for him to hear, and he sings along with her, not with Clara. Sondheim transforms “Loving You” into “Is This What You Call Love?” by repeating the love mood theme (see Example 1.1 above). They sing together the song that had previously marked Giorgio’s recognition that Fosca’s—not Clara’s—love was true. The musical concludes with a reprise of “I Wish I Could Forget You,” the song from the \textit{hamartia} moment. Of all these small reprises, the most important ones are “Loving You” and “I Wish I
Could Forget You.” Fosca sang both songs herself before, and when Giorgio repeats them as he reads her letter, the musical proves that indeed Fosca’s actions changed the captain’s life.

Music from a tragic character’s final confrontation with bad luck may refer to two parts of a musical: either to one of the Aristotelian concepts, or to some other part of the plot. Kurt Weill recalled Mrs. Maurrant’s motif from her reversal/recognition trio with Mr. Maurrant and Rose. In *Passion*, Sondheim reprises Giorgio’s recognition song “Is This What You Call Love?” in the finale. But, in addition to this, he has Fosca’s letter recapitulate *hamartia* (“I Wish I Could Forget You”) and reversal (“Loving You”). Bernstein reprises the “Somewhere” motif orchestrally again with modification in the accompaniment, providing an underlying subtext. Not only does this scene stand out from the others in *West Side Story* for incorporating a whole ballet sequence, but also a reference to *hamartia* and suffering would have not been effective, since they had both occurred without music. Moreover, “Somewhere” represents Tony and Maria’s dreams and hopes. When these failed, Bernstein attains dramatic coherence by reprising “Somewhere” with more dissonance than the ballet’s conclusion in Act II, Scene 1.

On the other hand, in *Sweeney Todd* and *Miss Saigon*, Sondheim and Schönberg opted for reprising other parts of the musical score that did not accompany the *hamartia* or reversal/recognition scenes. Sondheim went as far as the first scene of the show, reprising “The Barber and His Wife.” Schönberg reprised several motives from other songs, portraying Kim’s beliefs, culture, and decision to protect her son. These two composers went further than the tragic character’s *hamartia*, suffering, reversal, and recognition because, although all tragic characters considered in this study experience severe changes in their lives, Todd and Kim share an obsession that Mrs. Maurrant, Tony, Maria, and Giorgio do not. Todd is obsessed with revenge,
and Kim is obsessed with Chris’s return and the American dream. Obsession prevents Todd from reuniting with Lucy and Johanna, and Kim from reuniting with Chris.  

4. Conclusion

Aristotle’s complex plot, with the presence of reversal and recognition, emphasizes that in tragedy the unexpected occurs. Tragedy has the ability to deceive, because it contains characters who hope for happiness, making us consider that a happy ending is possible. But what was never thought possible interrupts those tragic characters’ journey and surprises the audience by causing these characters to suffer. The five Broadway musicals discussed here successfully embody this idea.

The final lines of Euripides’ Medea conclude, “many the things we think will happen, yet never happen. And many the things we thought could never be, yet the gods contrive.” These five Broadway musicals reflect the first half of this lamentation. Mrs. Maurrant never found a fulfilling marriage, nor a happy life, Tony and Maria never found “a place” for them, Sweeney Todd (or Benjamin Barker) never saw Johanna and Lucy again, Chris did not remain faithful to Kim, and Giorgio never thought true love could be found in someone else than Clara, let alone in someone who is repulsive. On one hand, these musicals do not reflect the second half of this lamentation because they do not introduce gods (or the oracles, seers, prophecies common in Greek tragedy) interfering in their tragic characters’ lives. On the other hand, the tragic characters themselves contrive for what they thought never could occur in their lives. Those six

77 Fosca features an obsessive behavior toward Giorgio and her love for him, but, as argued above, I do not consider her a tragic character.

tragic characters deserve to die—or face someone else’s death—not because of divine intervention, but because of their own actions and judgments. As Sweeney Todd explains to Mrs. Lovett: “For the rest of us, death will be a relief.”79

79 Wheeler and Sondheim, 101.
Chapter Three

Beyond Aristotle

Although scholars have employed Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the study of poetry, visual art, and tragedy, it has rarely stood on its own when it came to theory formulation. Stephen Halliwell writes, “the *Poetics* was not usually a self-sufficient or exclusive basis for classical principles” and that “its standing was always open to special contention in relation to the debates which surrounded the production of new literature and the fostering of genres not discussed by Aristotle (lyric, pastoral, romance, tragicomedy).”\(^1\) When considered in the twenty-first century, the *Poetics* alone is insufficient to characterize and provide a foundation for analyzing Broadway musicals through the aesthetics of tragedy.

In this chapter, I delineate five elements that appear in the five musicals considered for this study that enhance aspects of tragedy, but are not included or only briefly discussed in the *Poetics*. They are subplots, the Greek chorus, songs that hide tragic elements, songs as relief from tragedy, and affirmation of values that the characters deliver in the final moments of the musical.\(^2\) I investigate how these five elements contribute to the tragedy that the protagonists of

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2. Aristotle briefly alludes to the importance of the Greek chorus in tragedy, but he does not stipulate it as necessary for the genre. He probably took for granted that all plays—comic or tragic ones—included a chorus. I have included it in this section “beyond Aristotle” because I consider characteristics of the Greek chorus that exceed those Aristotle discussed in the *Poetics*. Traditionally, there has been a “chorus” in musical theater, and in this study I consider how they enhance the tragic character’s final tragedy.
these musicals experiences at the end of each drama, demonstrating that hamartia and reversal/recognition are not the only aspects that make these protagonists “tragic characters.”

1. Subplot

How do secondary characters contribute to the tragic character’s downfall? In Greek tragedy, gods and prophecies lead the protagonist to misfortunes. Although such a protagonist makes decisions and takes actions to fulfill some intention, he cannot escape fate. In the musicals I have studied, other characters’ decisions and actions play a part in promoting the tragic character’s downfall. Interactions between the protagonist’s decisions and actions with those by the secondary characters can lead to a tragic conclusion. I consider four characters in this discussion: Anita from West Side Story, Anthony and Johanna from Sweeney Todd, and the Engineer from Miss Saigon. These secondary characters are not present at the tragic characters’ climactic moments. Anita is not present when Tony is shot, Anthony and Johanna are not there when Todd realizes the Beggar Woman’s true identity, and the Engineer is not present when Kim commits suicide. They all appear shortly afterwards. Despite their secondary status, these characters’ actions interact with the main plot somewhere before the climax and set in motion the tragic character’s downfall.

Anita differs from Maria in West Side Story because she is in a relationship with Bernardo. Unlike the tragic character, Anita “sticks to her own kind. Moreover, she provides jaded and comic remarks that are in opposition with Maria’s naivety. While Maria wants something to happen when she sees the person with whom she is in love, Anita believes that “it’s

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3 I have not considered Rose and Sam from Street Scene as a subplot. I discuss their relationship to Mrs. Maurrant’s tragedy below in the last section of this chapter.
when I don’t look that it happens.” Anita also indicates that her interest in the relationship with Bernardo is far more sexual than romantic. Her lines in “The Quintet” reveal her physical attraction to him. She sings, “Anita’s gonna get her kicks tonight. We’ll have our private little mix tonight. . . . Don’t matter if he’s tired, as long as he’s hot.” Finally, Anita learns about Tony and Maria’s love and keeps the secret. Maria naively tells Tony, “Don’t worry. She likes us!”

Anita contributes to Tony and Maria’s downfall when she falsely reports to the Jets that Chino shot Maria, making Tony run desperately through the streets shouting for Chino to shoot him too. After the Jets almost rape Anita at the drugstore, she is unable to meet Tony and deliver Maria’s message. Instead, Anita faces the Jets and says, “I’ll give you a message for your American buddy! Tell the murderer Maria’s never going to meet him! Tell him Chino found out and—and shot her!” She does not intend to set tragedy into motion, but her message shocks Doc, who goes to the drugstore’s cellar and passes the news about Maria’s death to Tony. Thus Anita unintentionally avenges Bernardo’s death. In “A Boy Like That,” Anita informed Maria about her opinion about Tony: “He’ll murder your love; he murdered mine.” When she leaves the message for the Jets to inform “the murderer” about Maria’s death, not only does Anita doom Tony, but Tony and Maria’s future.


5 Ibid., 187.

6 Doc learns about the protagonists’ love as well and keeps the secret. Anita, however, is the only member of one of the gangs who learns about this love and Tony and Maria’s relationship.

7 Ibid., 182.

8 Laurents and Sondheim, 219.

9 Ibid., 213.
In Sweeney Todd, Anthony and Johanna’s romantic relationship stand in opposition to Todd’s hate against humanity and Mrs. Lovett’s cannibalistic business practices. Even if Mrs. Lovett is in love with Todd, Anthony and Johanna present a purer love. Anthony and Johanna resemble Romeo and Juliet. Even if their kin are not at war, their love—which was like Tony and Maria’s at first sight—is forbidden. When Anthony sings “Johanna,” looking at her at the window, the scene reminds us of (and can be staged as) the famous balcony scene. Moreover, at their first meeting during “Kiss Me,” they talk about marriage. By marrying Anthony, Johanna will not have to marry the Judge, just like Juliet avoids marriage to Paris.

Anthony and Johanna contribute to Todd’s downfall because their saga crosses with Todd’s at moments of hamartia. Todd never looks back or expresses regret for his murderous rampage, but if he had, he would have realized that Anthony and Johanna set his final tragedy in motion. Anthony’s sudden entrance into the barbershop in Act I causes the Judge to recognize the sailor, foiling Todd’s plan to execute the Judge and causes his affirmation of what will become his second hamartia. In addition, Todd uses Anthony to attract the Judge back to his chair in Act II. He sends Anthony to rescue Johanna at the asylum and instructs him to bring her back to the barbershop. It results in Johanna disguised herself as a sailor and hidding inside the chest during the murder of the Judge and Beggar Woman. Once Johanna leaves the chest, Todd almost commits a fourth hamartia when he tries to kills her as well.

The Engineer in Miss Saigon fights for his “American Dream” in a selfish way and tries to capitalize on the events in Kim’s life to benefit himself. As Jessica Sternfeld observes, the Engineer “rarely interacts with other characters in any realistic way” and “he has few human emotions other than greed.”\textsuperscript{10} He does not care about Kim and Chris’s story, but tries to use their

relationship as a means to gain entrance to the United States. At one point in Act I, he propositions Chris to exchange Kim for a Visa, which the GI refuses:

ENGINEER. We had a deal for Kim
But that’s on ice
CHRIS. What d’you mean?
ENGINEER. I’m sorry sergeant but I’ve changed the price
I need a Visa from your Embassy
You get me that, you’ll get the girl for free
CHRIS. Cut the crap, this money’s all I got
I don’t give Visas out! Is this a deal or not?
You tell me.
(Chris draws his revolver and aims at the Engineer)
ENGINEER. Okay, Okay. The money…It will do.\(^{11}\)

Later in the first act after having tracked down Kim, the Engineer begs her to marry her cousin Thuy so that he, the Engineer, will not be killed. He sings, “just say yes, I don’t care if you love him. Princess, life has it all over death.”\(^{12}\) Finally, the Engineer contributes to Kim’s downfall because he, incredulous that Chris would come to Kim’s place, tells her to go to the hotel where the Americans are, which leads to Kim’s revelation about Chris and Ellen’s marriage.

Schönberg, Boublil, and Maltby Jr. also single out the Engineer with the song “If You Want to Die in Bed.” It provides an insight into the character’s way of thinking when it comes to survival. We do not get to know much about him during the musical, but this song suggests that he has been responsible for taking care of himself for years, and he has learned that any opportunity is worth it in order to escape disasters around him. He believes “men will always be

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 14.
men, the rules are the same for king or for clerk” and that now “I know how things work.”\textsuperscript{13} Also the lyrics depict his opinion that life in America is much better. He sings: “When your life hangs by a thread, don’t cry about the fates. Grab a stash of cash and plan a restaurant in the States.”\textsuperscript{14} However, Schönberg, Boublil, and Maltby Jr. afford him some humanity in “Let Me See His Western Nose.” In this number, Kim tells the Engineer that Tam’s father is an American, a former GI, and the Engineer sees a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He sings about the little boy, “a passport in my hand, my new life can begin. Your brat is American, so they must let us in. In the playground of mankind.”\textsuperscript{15} He sings these lyrics to the theme from “The Movie in My Mind,” the same melody that the “Dreamland” prostitutes sang to illustrate what goes on inside their mind when they spend the night with American GIs, and how they expect that these men could provide them with a better life. Even if greed dominates the Engineer’s motivations, at this moment we see his aspirations and his hopes for a better standard of living is not so different from that of the prostitutes’. The relationship between main story and subplot in Miss Saigon is not one of friendship, but one of survival. The tragic character’s saga only moves him in a covetous way.

Thus, in these three musicals, primary and secondary characters meet at crucial junctures of the plot. In West Side Story and Miss Saigon, the convergence of characters occurs early in what Aristotle would call denouement, when Tony and Maria’s and Kim’s fortune begins to change from prosperity to anguish. In Sweeney Todd secondary characters cause a hamartia moment and interacts with the main plot throughout denouement, almost giving rise to another hamartia.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
In these three musicals, the tragedy overshadows the subplot’s final moments, and these secondary characters do not sing. When Anita appears in the second act after Bernardo’s death, she only laments her loss in “A Boy Like That.” She has no other opportunity to express any kind of suffering after her boyfriend’s death. Instead, Anita makes a decision to lie and becomes the means through which miscommunication takes place, leading to the tragic characters’ clash with bad luck. Sweeney Todd’s book is constructed so that by the end of the saga, Johanna and Anthony encounter good luck only after Todd and Mrs. Lovett’s death. Johanna will not have to flee from the Judge’s control anymore and will not have her guardian there to forbid her from marrying Anthony. She never learns that the Beggar Woman and the barber were her real parents, so seeing them dead when she enters the bakehouse in the final scene prevents her from suffering. Anthony may see the Judge’s death as a solution for him to be with Johanna. He does not totally grasp Todd’s behavior and regards him as a man he met once after having helped him, but who never shared much of his private life except for the first rendition of “The Barber and His Wife.” When Anthony enters the bakehouse in the final scene, he may be astonished by his friend’s death, but it does not generate any personal suffering. Anthony and Johanna, however, do not sing or even mention that they can consummate their love. In Miss Saigon, we know that the Engineer’s saga changes after Kim’s death and he will probably not attain his American dream. But the creators of this musical did not allow the Engineer to sing or even ponder his fate. The only impression we have as the curtain falls is that Tam will move to the United States with his father and stepmother. Thus, the emphasis in these

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16 Of course, this depends on stage direction. Anita can sing “A Boy Like That” in a mourning tone and extremely sad, but the moment still primarily concerns the tragic characters.

17 Wheeler and Sondheim, 201.
three musicals is the tragic characters’ death, and the subplots’ endings are left unresolved or implied.

In these three musicals, we learn much about the secondary characters. They state a purpose and/or conflict in their own saga and have at least one song of their own, which contrasts to the main plot. In addition, the secondary characters contribute to the protagonist’s confrontation with bad luck. They are, just like the tragic characters, not evil and ill-intentioned, but still unwittingly contribute to an unfortunate conclusion.

2. The Greek Chorus

The chorus belongs to the aesthetics of Greek theater, but not necessarily to tragic plays exclusively. Aristotle mentions the chorus’s importance within a tragic plot in a brief paragraph at the end of Poetics’ chapter 18. However, he neither elaborates on the subject nor provides enough detail to establish the chorus as one of the genre’s characteristics. Stephen Halliwell writes that even if Aristotle had included a chorus, it “should be handled as one of the actors,”\(^{18}\) because chapter 18 “simply asserts the need for a strong choral integration without in any way elucidating it” and for that reason “we are left with an unexplained challenge to the fundamental distinction between the chorus and the actors of tragedy.”\(^{19}\) Admittedly, following Aristotle’s pattern of plot unity discussed in the previous chapter, the strongest emotional themes of a tragedy emerge from the hero’s actions and not from the chorus. In this sense, the only way a

\(^{18}\) Aristotle Poetics 1456a.

chorus can be of real importance to the tragic plot is when its absence causes disruption in the storyline.\textsuperscript{20}

In this section, I demonstrate that the chorus in \textit{Street Scene}, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, and \textit{Passion} acquire similar functions to those that a chorus assumes in Greek tragedy. I delineate the roles the chorus performs in these three musicals. Because this dramatic technique is not unique to tragedy, I demonstrate how these Greek chorus’s roles contribute to those three musicals’ tragic agenda by delineating how the chorus in each musical interacts with the protagonists’ tragic saga. I consulted theories about Greek tragedy by commentators after Aristotle. I reviewed their approach to Greek chorus within a tragic plot and found examples of these approaches in those three musicals.

In Greek tragedy the chorus members can be or become any character. In Aeschylus’ \textit{Agamemnon}, for example, the oldest citizens from Argo form the chorus throughout the entire play. In the same way, the Maurrants’ neighbors form the Greek chorus in \textit{Street Scene}. In \textit{Sweeney Todd} and \textit{Passion}, however, Sondheim creates choruses that include both changing and named characters. In both musicals, as their scripts suggest, company members form choruses that represent the barber’s clients and victims, Mrs. Lovett’s customers, the contest’s attendees, and lunatics from Fogg’s asylum in \textit{Sweeney Todd}, and soldiers or servants in \textit{Passion}. The opening chorus in \textit{Sweeney Todd} features actors from the company who will be important characters in the story to come, namely, Tobias and Sweeney Todd himself. At the final rendition of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” all the actors join in the chorus singing about the protagonist. Company members who played named characters like Tobias, Johanna, Anthony, the Beggar Woman, the Judge, the Beadle, and Pirelli all sing words the chorus had sung before (new lyrics

\textsuperscript{20} Halliwell makes the same point and argues that the chorus in Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus}, for instance, is dispensable. See ibid.
appear only when the rest of the chorus join in). In *Passion* named characters like Lieutenant Torasso, Lieutenant Barri, Major Rizzolli, and Private Augenti act like Greek chorus in addition to the unnamed servants and soldiers.

The chorus’s role must be dramatically viable. As J. M. Bremer argues, the chorus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* sings about the hero’s “actual character and behavior but only to the possibility of Oedipus’ becoming a tyrant.”\(^{21}\) Similarly, in these musicals, the chorus sings about to the possibility of Mrs. Maurrant being an adulteress, Sweeney Todd being a “demon barber,” and Giorgio discovering Fosca’s passion. The Greek choruses in these musicals always sing the same music when referring to the main plot. The neighbors in *Street Scene* sing “Get a Load of That” twice to express their condemnation of Mrs. Maurrant’s behavior. In *Sweeney Todd*, the chorus sings the same ballad as a prologue, epilogue, and entr’acte to set the musical’s dark mood. And in *Passion*, the soldiers and servants always reprise musical material previously sung by Clara, Giorgio or Fosca. The named soldiers are the sole exception. Besides singing the protagonists’ musical material, they also introduce the song “Gossip” in order to talk about Giorgio behind his back.

Perhaps the most widely known aspect about the Greek chorus is its function as a commentator on the main characters’ actions. Considered one of the actors (a concept rooted in Aristotle), the chorus may refer “to particular actions, decisions and interventions by which [it] influences the course of a plot.”\(^{22}\) As it happens in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a Greek chorus may sing about the tragic character’s *hamartia*, reversal, recognition, personality, or environment. In *Street Scene* the neighbors comment on the action, summarizing the scene that


\(^{22}\) Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 244–45.
has just ended. After Mr. Maurrant sees his wife dancing with Mr. Sankey in “Wrapped in a
Ribbon and Tied in a Bow,” three neighbors recaps the scene:

MRS. JONES. Well, there was the three o’them…Mr. Maurrant lookin’ at Sankey, as if
he was ready to kill him, an’ Mrs. Maurrant as white as a sheet; an’ Sankey as
innocent as the babe unborn.
MRS. FIORENTINO. Did she say something?
MRS. JONES. No, no till after Sankey was gone. Then he wanted to know who he was
an’ what he was doin’ there. “He’s the milk collector,” she said.23

Another example of how the chorus summarizes the previous action occurs when “voices in the
crowd” grieve for Rose after the murder:

Who’s she?…Her daughter…
Poor thing!…Her mother’s dead.
Who killed her?…Her Husband!
About another man!…He killed them both.24

The nurses from Act II, Scene 2 also assume a Greek chorus role when they comment on the
action in their song “Lullaby.”25 One of them recalls the moment Mr. Maurrant shot, whereas the
other’s answer concerns the widespread problem of infidelity:

FIRST NURSEMAID. It’s worse than awful. Can you imagine what those two must have
felt like, when he walked in on them like that?
SECOND NURSEMAID. Well, he just happened to be one of the ones that finds out.
Believe me, there’s lots and lots of husbands that don’t know the half of what goes on up-
town, while they’re down-town, making a living.26

In Sweeney Todd the chorus sings about the tragic character’s first hamartia (Todd’s
resolution to kill Judge Turpin). Their number after “My Friends” describes Todd’s
humanization of his tools as “friends.” The chorus members sing, “lift your razor high, Sweeny.

23 Rice and Hughes, 33.
24 Ibid., 78.
25 Later in this chapter, I discuss this song as a comic relief from the main plot’s tragedy.
26 Rice and Hughes, 81.
Hear it singing, ‘yes!’”27 (the same words they sing after the murderer of the Judge), words
Sondheim set to the Dies Irae hymn.28 The chorus provides additional attributes of Todd’s
personality, which it had not mentioned in its first rendition of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd.”
The chorus sings about Todd’s other actions. After the contest, when Todd tells the Beadle he
would be welcome in his barbershop for “the closest shave [he] will ever know,”29 the chorus
sings, “Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned, Like a perfect machine ’e planned, barbing the
hook, baiting the trap, setting it out for the Beadle to snap.”30 After Todd kills Pirelli, who had
blackmailed the barber, the chorus members sings, “those who thought him a simple clod were
soon reconsidering under the sod.”31 This time, they sing something that textually resembles
Todd’s “My Friends” since it refers to the personification of the razor: “See you razor gleam,
Sweeney. Feel how well it fits, feel as it floats across the throats of hypocrites.”32

In Passion the soldiers and attendants reiterate Giorgio’s opinion about the outpost: “this
is hell . . . this godforsaken place.”33 Because they sing it after Giorgio and Fosca’s agreement
that nothing will happen between them, one might assume that the chorus knows that Giorgio’s
friendship with Fosca and missing Clara will both make his life “a living hell” even more than

27 Wheeler and Sondheim, 43.
28 On Sondheim’s use of the Dies Irae in Sweeney Todd, see Stephen Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway
Musicals (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 297–300; and Geoffrey Block, Enchanted Evenings:
The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University
Press, 2009), 353–58.
29 Wheeler and Sondheim, 67.
30 Ibid., 67–68.
31 Ibid., 81.
32 Ibid.
33 Lapine and Sondheim, 53.
when he sang these words himself. The soldiers’ song “Gossip” also works as commentary on Fosca’s and Giorgio’s actions. The soldiers mention events from the previous scenes in both renditions of the song. The soldiers offer their opinion about the incidents involving Colonel Giorgio and Fosca. As they sing about Giorgio’s personality, we can imagine that they believe Giorgio is getting involved with Fosca so that he can reap benefits from her cousin, Colonel Ricci. These gossiping soldiers do not learn anything about love or passion as they observe and remark on the couple’s relationship as outsiders. When Giorgio is gone for his leave and met by Fosca at the train, Giorgio’s reversal scene, the soldiers sing that Giorgio should actually distance himself from Fosca: “he’d [Giorgio] better get out quick from the Signora. . . . That’s not an easy trick with the Signora.”

Concerning the Greek chorus’s function as commentator, the chorus in Street Scene presents a distinctive function not found in Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd or Passion. Elmer Rice and Langston Hughes give different assignments depending on the sex of the chorus members. The women comment on the action (mainly Mrs. Maurrant’s) always through gossip. The men comment on the tragedy and even foreshadow it:

MR. OLSEN. Some day her husband is killing him [Sankey]
MRS. FIORENTINO. Dat would be terrible.
MR. JONES. He’s liable to do that. You know he [Mr. Maurrant] has a wicked look in his yes, dat baby has.
MRS. JONES. Well, it’s no more than he deserves, the little rabbit.

In Greek tragedy, the chorus features a leader who is able to leave the chorus for a scene and comment on the drama or the protagonist. This leader, labeled as the coryphaeus, speaks (or sings) to and for all of the other members of the chorus. In Sophocles’ Antigone the coryphaeus

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34 Ibid., 105.
35 Rice and Hughes, 18.
has a separate speech from the chorus with which he summarizes the morals of the play, presents its exposition, and provides some background. In *Street Scene*, Mr. Kaplan—Sam’s father—functions as a Greek coryphaeus. He criticizes society and human behavior and talks about tragedy before it occurs onstage. In Mr. Kaplan’s first singing moment (which coincides with his first words in the musical), he announces the second-act tragedy:

KAPLAN. All right. Put it out. There is anyhoo notting to read in des bourgeois papers. Oi de moiders! Oi de moiders! Oi de moiders in de kepitalist papers! Man kills his soulmate and throws her in the gutter. Ten-year-old daughter burns up her mutter. Nottinh but opium for de working kless. Oi de moiders in de kepitalist press.36

In her studies of gender in ancient Greece, Constantina Serimetakis analyzes the coryphaeus as a “leader of the chorus . . . who stands in opposition and in dialogue with the chorus.”37 Indeed, the creators of *Street Scene* portray Mr. Kaplan as the eldest character in the building, the only one able to criticize Mr. Maurrant’s behavior. Mr. Kaplan, like his son, reads incessantly, is aware of human avarice, and knows (and says) that in order for society to change “dis will require maybe a revolution.”38 No other character in the chorus looks beyond their own plight to see larger societal problems.

Interaction between the protagonist and the Greek chorus may be vital to the story line. Tragic heroes in Greek tragedy agree, disagree, interact, or socialize with the chorus. A tragic outcome in a character’s life may result from not listening to the chorus’ ideas and advice. In

36 Ibid., 5.


38 Rice and Hughes, 24.
Sophocles’ *Antigone* the chorus makes King Creon change his mind about burying Antigone alive. It informs Electra that Aegisthus is arriving in Euripides’ *Electra*. And Phaedra laments to the chorus when she realizes that her stepson has heard the truth about her love for him in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. In *Street Scene* such interaction occurs through Mrs. Maurrant and the neighbors, who despise her adulterous behavior. She socializes with her neighbors, but initially disregards their comments. Although they do not sing or talk about Mrs. Maurrant’s actions to her, she knows that she would not be the object of their derision if she adhered to their judgment that “a woman ought to know her place and act like decent women do.”39 In fact, these neighbors eventually side with Mr. Maurrant. After he sings “Let Things Be Like They Always Was,” they concur by exclaiming “Good for you,” “Sure thing,” and “You’re damn right.”40 Moreover, the chorus’s indifference to Mrs. Maurrant intensifies her loneliness (“Nobody who understands,”41 she wails).

Barbara Fraser in her essay “Revisiting Greece: The Sondheim Chorus”42 argues that Sondheim’s approach to chorus in *Sweeney Todd* is close to the Greek model because the Beggar Woman interacts with other characters alerting them about the “city on fire” and Mrs. Lovett’s “mischief.” If the Beggar Woman were a member of the chorus, she would report something importantly vital about the storyline, something that comes from no other character. She would address the protagonist or the chorus itself in order to warn them. But the Beggar Woman never

39 Ibid., 8.
40 Ibid., 26.
41 Ibid., 61.
does. Although she is able to identify something important, which others disregard, her cries of “mischief” to the audience and random people onstage primarily depict her as lunatic.

The Greek chorus’s function exceeds that of commentator. In Greek drama the chorus “constitutes not only a collective character standing as a defined relation to the other characters of the drama, but also an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience whose perspective it helps to shape.” The chorus can draw the audience’s attention, set the mood, and provide basic background information. The balladeers in Sweeney Todd address the audience, never other characters. They provide traces of Sweeney Todd’s personality, identify place (London Town), and describe his barbershop. In order to draw our attention, they foreshadow Todd’s acts of Murder: “he shaved the faces of gentlemen who never thereafter were heard of again” and “And what if none of their [the clients’] souls were saved? They went to their Maker impeccably shaved.” Sweeney Todd, as the scripts indicates, emerges from a grave as the chorus faces it and sings with them referring to himself in the third person. He first mentions revenge: “He served a dark and a vengeful God,” opening the stage for the unfolding story: “What happened then . . . well, that’s the play, and he wouldn’t want us to give it away.” The tragic character helps the company set the mood for the musical. In Street Scene, the neighbors bookend the show with their “Ain’t It Awful the Heat,” setting the mood for both the story’s season and setting.

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44 Another way of investigating these characters is relating them to the Brechtian device of Verfremdungseffekt, since these men and women address the audience, an influence Sondheim repeatedly denies.

45 Wheeler and Sondheim, 23–24.

46 Ibid., 25.

47 Ibid.
The Greek chorus reveals what is tragic as its members lament. In Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the chorus laments the sad events from Iphigenia’s life. In *Street Scene*, right after the murder, the neighbors sing an entire number about the tragedy, “The Woman Who Lived Up There.” Not only do they summarize the event, but they also pity the tragic character. They refer to Mrs. Maurrant as “poor thing” (just like Mrs. Lovett refers to Lucy) and describe the scene with lyrics such as “they’re bringing her down now.” They intensify the tragedy by humming and singing Sam’s words to Rose as Mrs. Maurrant dies and is taken away. Kurt Weill enhances the tragedy by having the Greek chorus repeat the tragic character’s main theme. (Actually the music is so powerful at the conclusion of their lament, that one might think the musical as a whole is coming to an end). The most tragic effect comes from the chorus’ conclusion that “She loved him…Poor Thing! He loved her.” The chorus mentions the Maurrants’ love before Mr. Maurrant himself. He admits his love for his wife later, and the Greek chorus accompanies him in the background.

The Greek chorus may link past events to the present. The chorus is “in one sense the guardians of the past, mediating, interpreting it, moralizing upon it, but never developing it into an authoritative pattern that may affect the present.” This summarizes the function of the neighbors in *Street Scene*. From them we learn about Mrs. Maurrant’s affair with Mr. Sankey. When the chorus sings “Get a Load of That,” they provide information about two characters we do not know very well yet:

MRS. JONES. You wouldn’t think a married woman
With a grown-up daughter

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48 Rice and Hughes, 78.

49 Ibid.

Would be fooling round with men
like she didn’t oughta.\textsuperscript{51}

In addition, the Greek chorus may refer to past events that we have witnessed onstage. In

*Passion*, after Giorgio is granted a five days leave to Milan in Scene 4, the soldiers repeat

Fosca’s music and lyrics from Scene 3:

\begin{verbatim}
AUGENTI, SOLDIER I & SOLDIER II. All the time I watched from my room…
AUGENTI. Thinking we’d meet…
SOLDIER I. Thinking you’d look at me…
SOLDIER II. Thinking you’d—
AUGENTI, SOLDIER I & SOLDIER II. –Be repelled by what you saw.
SOLDIER I & SOLDIER II. Don’t reject me…
AUGENTI, RIZZOLLI, BARRI & TORASO. Don’t deny me…
AUGENTI, SOLDIER I & SOLDIER II. Understand me, be my friend.
ALL. They hear drums.
We hear music.
Be my friend…\textsuperscript{52}
\end{verbatim}

The chorus draws attention to Fosca’s view that Giorgio and she are the same because they are different from the others. Also, the soldiers remind Giorgio of his promise to be her friend. A promise he has just broken in this scene by rejecting her, trying to free himself from her, and by purposely going away.

Just like the tragic protagonist, the Greek chorus, too, gains deeper insights and acquires new knowledge. In Greek tragedy this learning occurs when the chorus sings the morals and conclusions of the play, as it happens in Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The chorus learns from witnessing tragedy and recites (or sings) the new understandings. After the double murder in *Street Scene*, tragedy makes the neighbors realize that “she loved him” and “maybe he loved her too.”\textsuperscript{53} As they witness Mr. Maurrant’s conversation with Rose, they conclude, “he

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Rice and Hughes, 8.}
\footnote{Lapine and Sondheim, 42.}
\footnote{Rice and Hughes, 78.}
\end{footnotes}
loved her, too,” suggesting that the tragic event changed the whole community. In *Passion* Fosca’s death enlightens the chorus. At the end, when Giorgio and Fosca are singing about how their love will outlive time and even death, the chorus reprises the song “I Wish I Could Forget You”: “How could I ever wish you away? I see now I was blind.” At the final moment of the musical, when Giorgio realizes his clash with bad luck, the Greek chorus too understands the words of love with which Fosca tried to teach Giorgio when she dictated the letter to him. A proof that tragedy left a lesson for everybody from the outpost, and even for Clara in Milan, occurs when all repeat Fosca and Giorgio’s words “your love will live in me.”

*Street Scene*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Passion* feature a dramatic technique that dates back to Greek tragedy. These musicals’ choruses function similarly to the Greek chorus. Within musical theater, these musicals contrast with conventions of the genre as their creators make the chorus a pivotal element that contributes to the tragic conclusion.

3. Looking Beyond the Surface: Songs That Provide a Foil for Tragedy

In this section I demonstrate that three of the five musicals considered for this study feature songs that provide a foil for the tragic impact. These songs appear at some point before the beginning of the denouement, and because the characters focus on something else, not even considering the hypothesis of *hamartia* and reversal, these songs provide a foil for tragedy. For this discussion, I draw on Scott McMillin’s idea of “the unseen, omniscient orchestra [that]

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54 Ibid., 87.
55 Lapine and Sondheim, 130.
56 Ibid.
57 Comic musicals without tragic characters in their plots often feature the Greek chorus technique as well and accomplish some of the same functions. Examples include *A Little Night Music, Little Shop of Horrors, The Human Comedy*, and *Legally Blond*, which satirizes the technique.
knows what is in the minds of the characters even before the characters do.”58 In the songs included in this section (“Tonight” from *West Side Story*, “Not While I’m Around” from *Sweeney Todd*, and “I’d Give My Life for You” from *Miss Saigon*), not only does the orchestra know what is in the characters’ mind, but also what their future will be.

I have argued elsewhere that “Somewhere” in *West Side Story* represents Tony and Maria’s reversal and recognition. In their dream, they realize they are doomed due to the consequences of the rumble. The song also appears in their clash with bad luck. Maria sings it after Chino shoots Tony, who tries to sing it with her, showing that he still has hopes for a place for them even near death. Bernstein and Sondheim announce all these tragic elements in the first act during the duet “Tonight.” In this parallel to Shakespeare’s famous balcony scene, the lovers express that something they had been longing for in their lives finally happened “tonight.” The duet reflects the intensity of their love at first sight. They sing how everything in the world has changed after having met one another. The creators provide a foil for tragedy at the end of the duet. When the singers are holding the final notes, the orchestra echoes the main theme from “Somewhere,” the melody to which they will later sing the words “there’s a place for us.” Next, the strings play the two-notes motif to which they will sing the word “somewhere,” the same one that Bernstein set to the tritone at end the show, where the lovers will only be united through

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death. If the tragic characters believe that “it all began tonight,” the orchestra is showing its omniscience that tonight, too, as they meet and fall in love, their tragic fate is sealed.

Sondheim’s lyrics contribute to the intensity of the moment. The lovers’ final words at the duet are “when you dream, dream of me tonight.” Together with the music echoing “Somewhere,” which will be a dream, the lyrics foreshadow that their dreaming will begin the denouement of the tragic plot.

“Not While I’m Around” from Sweeney Todd seems like a naïve ballad. One that parents might sing to their children, children might sing to their parents, or even friends might sing to one another. But in the context of Sweeney Todd, it contains elements that contribute to the tragedy. Mrs. Lovett’s chorus of the number does not have the same meaning as Tobia’s. The song depicts his gullibility musically, but at the same time, it belies her evilness too. The boy swears to protect Mrs. Lovett from monsters and even men, telling her he “will send’em howling.” Mrs. Lovett, on the other hand, uses the same song to hide the truth about Pirelli’s death and her intention of getting rid of Tobias now that he suspects the truth about Todd’s actions. Just like she deceived Todd, she deceives Tobias too, trying to distract him from these facts and to comfort him repeating his own melody. But the orchestra knows the truth. When she


60 Nigel Simeone claims that “Tonight” has several reminiscences of one of the songs that was initially considered for the balcony scene, but that was moved to the Act II ballet. He also points out that some early manuscripts contained even more sections of the “Somewhere” tune. By making these songs resemble each other, Bernstein sets not only Tony and Maria’s love to song, but their tragedy as well. See Nigel Simeone, Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 99–101.

61 Laurents and Sondheim, 163–64.

62 Wheeler and Sondheim, 173.
sings “nothing’s gonna harm you, not while I’m around, nothing’s gonna harm you, Toby, not while I’m around.” Sondheim adds a countermelody that creates a dissonance with her melody. While Mrs. Lovett sings these words diatonically in C major, the orchestra introduces a chromatic and jarring two-part melody in a high range whose contour is F-sharp–B-flat–A and E-flat–E natural–A-flat. Sondheim’s melody belies the meaning of the lyrics. Tobias, on the other hand, is so tormented and confused that he cannot hear the orchestra’s insinuation. The song becomes even more sinister when Mrs. Lovett reprises it as she looks for Tobias with Todd. She repeats the boy’s words and melody “nothing’s gonna harm you,” but we know that these two will, in fact, harm Tobias.

“Not While I’m Around” also provides a foil for tragedy in the sense that Tobias promises to protect Mrs. Lovett from Todd, and when he sees Todd kneeling over Lucy’s body—unaware that Mrs. Lovett is dead—he accomplishes what he promised. “Ya harmed her too, have ya?” he asks Todd, referring to the Beggar Woman. “Ya shouldn’t, ya know. Ya shouldn’t harm nobody,” he says echoing words from his song. And by killing Todd, Tobias believes “nothing is gonna harm” Mrs. Lovett. With that, Tobias becomes another character worthy of pity. He performs “Not While I’m Around” unaware that Mrs. Lovett was a demon prowling around him, and he murders Todd unsuspecting that Todd did charm Mrs. Lovett “with a smile for a while” before he killed her.

In Miss Saigon Kim sings “I’d Give My Life for You” at the end of the first act, and the orchestra concludes the song foreshadowing her tragedy from the second act. Kim tells her son

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63 Ibid., 176.

64 Ibid., 201.
that he will be who he wants to be and “choose whatever heaven grants.” She does not include herself in her son’s future. She says that for him to have his chance, she would give her life for him. The song foreshadows the denouement because this is what happens in the second act. She does not know Chris has another wife, but Kim seems to be able to consider the hypothesis of clashing with bad luck for her son’s sake. The line “no one must stop what I should do” links this song to the final tragedy: at the end of the first act after this number, she flees to Bangkok; at the end of the second act, after the song’s reprise, she kills herself. She takes both actions to assure that Tam will have a better life. At the end of the first act, as Kim, Tam, and the Engineer take the boat to Bangkok (and the curtain falls), the orchestra re-states the melody with which she sang, “I have had my feel of pain, I will not look back again, I would rather die” in “This Money Is Yours.” The orchestra signals that a tragedy will occur. Having her “I Would Rather Die” theme sounding at the very end of Act I, after a song about giving her own life for Tam, points to the tragic outcome.

If “the orchestra knows everything” and plus “what is coming and never misunderstands a character or a turn of the plot,” it perceives the characters’ recognition, what could have been different, and their intentions. In these three songs, the omniscient orchestra not only foreshadows the tragic element, but the tragedy itself.

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65 Schönberg, Boublil, and Maltby Jr., 16.
66 Ibid., 8.
4. Moments of Comic Relief

With the exception of Passion, the other four musicals feature at least one moment that makes the audience focus on something other than the protagonist’s pain, suffering, and misfortune. Songs for these moments may be comic, but not necessarily so. In this section, I investigate these songs of “comic relief” showing that some composers use them only at the point of complication (before fortune changes), as a means to break the tension. Others use “relief songs” only within the denouement (after the change in fortune has begun), interrupting the tragic character’s saga from reversal/recognition to the clash with bad luck. Some musicals use songs as relief in both parts of the Aristotelian tragic plot.\(^{68}\) In addition, they may reveal another side of the tragic character.

In Street Scene the “Ice-Cream Sextet” fulfills the task of relief during the complication of the plot. It succeeds Mrs. Maurrant’s “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” in which she sings about her dashed hopes and dreams, and the neighbors’ reaction to her affair in a reprise of “Get a Load of That.” The sextet comes before Mr. Maurrant’s aria “Let Things Be the Way They Always Was,” in which we learn that Mrs. Maurrant has ended up with someone who represents the opposite of what she used to dream. Besides being an entrance song for Lippo, the sextet provides comic relief. The Italianate style of the ensemble characterizes Lippo’s background in a stereotypical way. This clash of genres (Italian opera for ice cream) results in comic passages, such as Miss Fiorentino’s coloratura to express her predilection for vanilla.

“Wrapped in a Ribbon and Tied in a Bow” also breaks the impact of Mr. Maurrant’s narrow-minded point-of-view and allows another moment of relief in the neighborhood. After hearing “Let Things Be the Way They Always Was,” director Charles Friedman suggested to

\(^{68}\) Aristotle did not discuss moments of relief in the Poetics, since Greek tragedy did not include them. I propose here that some songs can be interpreted as a relief from the protagonists’ tragic saga.
Weill that he place the song immediately after the aria, so that it could “brighten things.” These two numbers, the sextet and “Wrapped in a Ribbon,” break the tension in the main plot during the moment of complication.

“Lullaby” works as a relief within the denouement, providing something comic, something to break the tension after the murder and before the ending of the opera. The nursemaids rock the babies to sleep as they sing a lullaby about the “parents” who behave like the Maurrants. Langston Hughes rhymed the nursery words with those about the tragedy (“Rest, little chick. Maurrant came home too quick. Doze, pussycat! He got them with his gat”). The nursemaids’ lullaby also refers to the “husbands and wives” who happen to be these babies’ parents (“Hush, baby hush. Your daddy is a lush. Shut your eyelids tight. He’s plastered ev’ry night”).

In West Side Story two songs provide comic relief. Composer Leonard Bernstein once wrote that West Side Story was a tragic story told through musical comedy terms. The songs “America” and “Gee Officer Krupke” represent musical comedy terms as they lighten the musical’s tragic story. “America,” performed in Act I, interrupts and alleviates both Tony and Maria’s saga and the rivalry between the gangs. The Puerto Rican girls celebrate life in America after the main couple sings “Tonight” and before the “war council” at Doc’s drugstore. During “America,” Anita comically mocks Rosalia’s picture of her return to Puerto Rico. Lyricist Steven Sondheim makes the girls disagree, but still rhyme:

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70 Rice and Hughes, 80.

71 Ibid., 81.

72 Manuscript letter dated July 23, 1957 from Leonard Bernstein to Felicia Cohn Montealegre, quoted in Block, Enchanted Evenings, 295.
ROSALIA. Hundreds of flowers in full bloom.
ANITA. Hundreds of people in each room!

... 

ROSALIA. I’ll give them new washing machine.
ANITA. What have they got there to keep clean?

... 

ROSALIA. When I will go back to San Juan–
ANITA. When you will shut up and get gone!
ROSALIA. Everyone there will give big cheer!
ANITA. Everyone there will have moved here!73

Jerome Robbins intentionally placed “Gee, Officer Krupke” as comic relief after “Somewhere.” He believed it reflected the Jets’ desperation after witnessing two deaths.74 Each of the boys impersonates a character (a judge, a social worker, a psychiatrist, et al.) who contributes to the juvenile’s delinquency. Bernstein’s march-like music and Sondheim’s lyrics containing street slang contribute to the song’s comic effect. Sondheim believes that the song’s last words (“Gee, officer Krupke, Krup you!”) represent “the best lyric line in the show.”75 He had initially intended to end the song with all the Jets singing a loud four-letter word to officer Krupke, but some of the producers censored the use of profanity. It was Bernstein who came up with the solution of substituting “krup” for “fuck.” These last words bring a comic relief to the plot’s development, but also reveal danger, rudeness, and even some menace in the Jets’ behavior as a gang. In addition, the song contrasts with the numbers that precede and succeed it. “Gee, Officer Krupke” occurs when the denouement is imminent. It follows the ballet and the tragic characters’ dream that a reversal could occur, and it precedes Maria’s sending Anita to deliver her message to Tony, after “I Have a Love,” when fortune begins to change. The Jets do

73 Laurens and Sondheim, 168.
74 Dash, 115.
not know the subsequent meeting will lead to tragedy, but the song pumps up their confidence, preparing them to face whatever comes.

In *Sweeney Todd*, the song “Little Priest” provides broad comic relief. It occurs after Todd’s “Epiphany,” a moment so rich in psychological insight that he recognizes a reversal from his first *hamartia* and sings a second one. “Little Priest,” a bawdy duet for Todd and Mrs. Lovett, lightens the mood, alleviating Todd’s cry against humanity. However, “Little Priest” does not just provide relief. It gives Mrs. Lovett the opportunity to sing about her meatpie enterprise and those “who gets to sell.” The comic aspect, even if about cannibalism, results from the clever rhymes and the ingredients Mrs. Lovett dreams of serving in her pie shop:

```plaintext
TODD. What is that?
MRS. LOVETT. It’s fop. Finest in the shop.
Or we have some shepherd’s pie peppered
with actual shepherd on top.
And I’ve just begun.
Here’s the politician—so oily
it’s served with a doily—
(Todd makes a face)
Have one.
TODD. Put it on a bun.
(As she looks at him quizzically)
Well, you never know if it’s going to run.
MRS. LOVETT. Try the friar. Fried, it’s drier.
TODD. No, the clergy is really too coarse and too mealy.
MRS. LOVETT. Then actor—that’s compacter.
TODD. Yes, and always arrive overdone.”
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Indeed, *Sweeney Todd* “was never intended to be a purely tragic vision, so Mrs. Lovett’s black comic vision is given equal weight” with this song. “Little Priest” foregrounds relief and concludes the first act.

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76 Wheeler and Sondheim, 110–11.

Mrs. Lovett’s “By the Sea,” too, works as comic relief during complication of the plot. Miss Lovett gets to sing about where she “would really like to go” after Todd has clearly enacted his second hamartia (murdering his customers) and before Todd starts scheming to have the Judge return to his barbershop. Her attempt to call Todd’s attention to a picturesque life with her by the English Channel (whose seagulls’ calls she imitates during the song) combined with Sondheim’s lively music and witty lyrics recalls a music hall ditty. In the final scene, however, the song looses its comic function. Instead, Mrs. Lovett desperately reprises it in desperation when she realizes that Todd has discovered that she lied to him.

In Miss Saigon, the Engineer’s song “The American Dream” interrupts the tension in the main plot. The song follows Kim’s reversal song (“Room 317”) and Chris’s confrontation with Ellen, and it appears before Kim’s suicide. It allows a secondary character to sing about his aspirations. The song also reveals something about the Engineer’s past, but nothing that changes our opinion of him. The number fulfills the typical function of an “eleven o’clock” number: “a rousing number that stops the show at a point where it no longer needs to get started—that is, near the end.” Moreover, in this song, “melody, rhythm, and harmony join forces with principals, chorus, and orchestra to end an evening with force and excitement.” All of the intense activity onstage depicts the Engineer’s obsession with life in America.

“Lullaby,” “Gee, Officer Krupke,” and “Little Priest” follow the Greek tradition of the satyr. During the fifth century BCE, satyrs were enacted on the stage after a tragedy. In fact, in its origins, a satyr was a fourth play, one that followed a tragic trilogy (e.g., Aeschylus’

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78 Wheeler and Sondheim, 163.


80 Ibid.
Presumably by the same playwright as the tragedies, satyrs usually concerned the same subject as the tragedy but in a comic way (hence the origin of the term “satire”). In this sense, satyrs “did not invent entirely new material for the occasion, but made use of material that had been treated extensively and most seriously beforehand.”\textsuperscript{81} In the Broadway musicals discussed above, comic relief songs share a related function as a Greek satyr.

*Street Scene* is about relationships and adultery, aspects which the two nursemaids mock with their “Lullaby.” In *West Side Story*, tragedy results from the gangs’ rivalry. In “Gee, Officer Krupke,” the Jets reveal that they understand why they “natcherly are punks”\textsuperscript{82} and blame their condition on their home life and society—the subjects that they lampoon in their song. As Keith Garebian put it, “They perversely use society’s language or catch-phrases for their own audacious ends, thereby reminding us that they will always be the enemy because their energy is so creatively rebellious.”\textsuperscript{83} Nigel Simeone concludes that with this song “the Jets seem indifferent to human tragedy, finding it easier to mock someone else (and each other).”\textsuperscript{84} In *Sweeney Todd* “Little Priest” becomes a satyr about Todd’s own behavior. He and Mrs. Lovett satirize higher-ranking men as possible ingredients for her pies. These men—priests, lawyers, marines, generals, et al.—are those whom Todd despises and refers to as “the privileged few, making mock of the vermin in the lower zoo”\textsuperscript{85} and those “with [their] foot in the other one’s


\textsuperscript{82} Laurents and Sondheim, 206.


\textsuperscript{85} Wheeler and Sondheim, 32.
face. Todd and Mrs. Lovett sing about these men in a sarcastic tone, but the characters’ levity derives their plan of serving these men of privilege as filling for meat pies in a pie shop that serves the Victorian working class.

By interrupting the main tragic plot, comic songs provide relief in the Greek tradition by making a comic assertion about serious topics (although in ancient Greece, it occurred after the tragedy). In musical theater, these songs reify that “tragedy is the substance, the satyr play its irreverent reflection.” In conclusion, whether comic, sarcastic, romantic, or ambitious, these comic numbers interrupt the main tragic plot and allow secondary characters to comment and satirize the main plot’s tragedy.

5. Affirmation of Human Values and the Post-Tragic Episode

In her book *Elements of Tragedy*, theater historian Dorothea Krook suggests that in a tragedy the main character’s new knowledge encompasses not only a realization of the facts that led him or her to the final downfall, but also that tragedy celebrates the human experience. Admittedly, tragedy is an imitation of a serious action, according to Aristotle, and not only tragic characters, but anyone can execute numerous *hamartiai* in the course of a lifetime. Having realized the ramifications, a person learns, changes, and examines her or his principles in a different light. The tragic character on stage usually does not have time to reach this kind of

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86 Ibid., 101.

87 Kerr, 25.

88 Another link between satire in Broadway musical theater and ancient Greek tragedy occurs in the work of musical theater performer and cabaret song composer Mary Liz McNamara. In 2006 she wrote a song titled “Oedipus” for her cabaret shows in which she satirizes Euripides’ plot, Oedipus’s patricide and incest, and the more modern Oedipus complex.

recognition, because after having been involved with bad luck, death arrives. Krook argues that this knowledge forces one or more characters (who may come from the chorus) to affirm the human values that the tragic play has just examined. In Krook’s theory of tragedy, this affirmation comprises one of the necessary elements.

Another theorist, Oscar Mandel, stipulates in his book *A Definition of Tragedy* that some plays present a “Post-Tragic Episode.” 90 Playwrights may choose to add a last scene after the tragedy occurs to “carry us back to the tragedy itself, and make the final emotional or philosophical commentary on the action.” 91 In his discussion, Mandel proposes that a scene (or an episode) that follows the climactic moment may have different functions, serving either the surviving characters onstage or the audience. Besides reflecting on the tragedy itself, the post-tragic episode may function to redeem the hero from her or his terrible deeds or to re-establish the mood from the beginning of the play. 92

In this last session of this chapter, I discuss how Krook’s and Mandel’s theories of tragedy might be applicable to the musicals under discussion. For *Street Scene, West Side Story, Sweeney Todd*, and *Passion*, I consider part of a scene, a song, or a speech that occurs after the tragedy and demonstrate how all functions that Mandel proposes for the post-tragic episode above can be found in these musicals. For each type of episode, I discuss how the characters affirm a value learned from the tragic character’s experience and which values they affirm.

The song “Don’t Forget the Lilac Bush” from *Street Scene* and Maria’s final speech in *West Side Story* both exemplify what Mandel calls an “emotional commentary” on the tragic

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91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., 158–61.
action. This commentary differs from the chorus’s commentaries on the main action (discussed above) because in the post-tragic episode it is one of the protagonists who participates in an emotional commentary. In *Street Scene*, Elmer Rice features Rose and Sam in a post-tragic episode. These characters reveal how Mrs. Maurrant’s death has influenced and changed them. As Rose explains in the couple’s final song, she is leaving because “loving and belonging . . . are not the same.” Sam tries to convince her to stay with him, and they sing:

ROSE. Look at my father, my poor mother:
If she had belonged to herself,
If he had belonged to himself,
It would never have happened.
And that’s why, even though my heart breaks,
I can’t belong to you,
Or have you belong to me.
SAM. Oh Rose, this is the end of my world.

Sam and Rose’s budding relationship had been an important element of the plot, and Elmer Rice could not have allowed the curtain to fall after Mrs. Maurrant’s and Mr. Sankey’s deaths, without completing Sam and Rose’s sagas. By using the post-tragic episode to depict the implications of the tragedy, Rice allowed Sam and Rose to complete their story and affirm the human values that the tragic play has just examined.

In *West Side Story*, the final post-tragic episode covers half of the final scene, after Tony’s death. Maria’s speech while holding Chino’s gun and the final procession comprise this episode. Like Rose’s final passage in *Street Scene*, Maria’s emotional scene refers back to the tragedy that affected her and the gangs. In addition, it affirms a common human emotion: hate. She exclaims:

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93 Ibid., 158.
94 Rice and Hughes, 89.
95 Ibid.
How many bullets are left, Chino? Enough for you? [Pointing at another.] And you? [At Action.] All of you? We all killed him; and my brother and Riff. I, too. I can kill now because I hate now.96

Unlike Rose, Maria is a tragic character, and she realizes that Tony’s downfall is hers also.

Maybe this explains why Rose can move away from the building after the tragic event, while Maria cannot. The post-tragic episode shows Maria, the Puerto Rican heroine, having matured into a woman full of grief. This final episode also touches on the tragedy one final time before the curtain falls and allows some of the characters to reconcile. After Maria’s speech and during the procession, the Jets and Sharks carry Tony’s body offstage.

Mandel mentions that the post-tragic episode is also a way of avoiding “doom[ing] the protagonist forever”97 for his or her hamartia. This redemption occurs in Street Scene, Sweeney Todd, and Passion. Street Scene makes use of three aspects in the last scene (or episode) that place universality in the musical’s main action, suggesting that no one in this world is free from experiencing the Maurrants’ story. This universality contextualizes Mrs. Maurrant’s adultery and Mr. Maurrant’s double murder and becomes the musical’s affirmation of human values. The nursemaids’ “Lullaby,” although heard earlier in the musical, begins to address this point. They remind us that the Maurrants are not the only couple in New York City involved in adultery. Seen through the eyes of a callous outsider, the deeds do not come across as terribly appalling. In the final scene, the new couple who come to see the Murrants’ former apartment contribute to this idea. Their presence infers that the same story may repeat itself and indicate that we are all

96 Laurents and Sondheim, 223.

97 Mandel, 161.
capable of making poor decisions and experiencing tragedy.\textsuperscript{98} Their lines, just like the second nursemaid’s, suggest that the Maurrants’ tragedy affects only those close to them, not outsiders:

\begin{center}
THE MAN. Somebody must’ve just died.
THE WOMAN. Yeah, maybe that’s why they’re moving out.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{center}

Finally, Elmer Rice includes in the musical’s script a child’s voice from offstage who sings “come in, come in, wherever you are!” This is first heard at the beginning of Act I, just before Mrs. Maurrant’s first appearance on stage. The two previous numbers had established the mood, the place and time, and some of the tenants of the building. With that backdrop, the tragic character enters, and the child’s words inform this can be anyone, it does not matter where he or she comes from, anyone can be such a victim. In Street Scene, it happens to be Anna Maurrant. The repetition of the offstage voice during the post-tragic episode, after Rose leaves, suggests that anyone may be not only a tragic character, but the victim of a tragic character’s actions too. Thus, this child’s line bookends the family Maurrant’s presence onstage, leaving the beginning and conclusion of the musical to the chorus of neighbors.

\textit{Sweeney Todd’s} post-tragic episode features the final rendition of the chorus’ “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd.” Joined by the actors who played the main characters, the chorus still sings about the tragic character, but now they claim that anyone in the audience can act like Sweeney Todd. The chorus reminds us of the same universality present in Street Scene. “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” calls attention to the protagonist’s human side, claiming that he is not the only one consumed by revenge. The lyrics reinforce this idea when the chorus sings:

\textsuperscript{98} The chorus embodies this idea of universality as its members pity Rose when Mrs. Maurrant dies. They never mention names (“The man from down the street and the woman who lived up there”). In a recent French production of Street Scene, this man and woman were played by the same actors who had played Mr. and Mrs. Maurrant.

\textsuperscript{99} Rice and Hughes, 90.
“perhaps today you gave a nod to Sweeney Todd.”\textsuperscript{100} The script indicates that when the company starts repeating Sweeney Todd’s name, they “point around the theater.”\textsuperscript{101} By pointing at the audience, the company performs what Mandel describes as “a final push in to the abyss,”\textsuperscript{102} leaving no time for lamenting or mourning, just realizing that what was performed upon the stage could be real.

In \textit{Passion} James Lapine frees Giorgio from condemnation for the way he treated Fosca. Her words “to die loved is to have lived” demonstrates that she is aware that sleeping with Giorgio may be more than her fragile health could take. After Giorgio learns about Fosca’s death, he also learns that she forgave him, since she wrote in her final letter, a \textit{Liebestod} passage worthy of Wagner, that now that she is loved, she can transcend death and will always be with him. One may argue that Giorgio’s clash with bad luck merges with the post-tragic episode, which makes the ending of \textit{Passion} very different from the other Broadway musicals under consideration. The human value and emotion that \textit{Passion} celebrates at the end is not hate, obsession, adultery, or revenge, but rather love and redemption.

The post-tragic episode re-establishes the opening mood of the place where the action began. Mandel’s theory seems to be rooted in Aristotle’s concept that tragedy (the \textit{hamartia} action, reversal, and recognition) disturbs a community, makes it the most tense at the climax, and returns to the initial atmosphere after the tragic character, who initially disturbed peace, meets death. \textit{Street Scene} and \textit{Sweeney Todd} are the only ones of these five Broadway musicals that re-establish the opening mood during the post-tragic episode. In \textit{Sweeney Todd}, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” bookends the show with the actors addressing the audience. Three aspects

\textsuperscript{100} Wheeler and Sondheim, 203.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Mandel, 158.
from *Street Scene*’s final moments suggest order has been reestablished. First, the chorus makes its final pronouncement. After Rose leaves, Mrs. Jones turns to the others and says:

MRS. JONES. Wouldn’t surprise me a bit if she turned out the same way as her mother. She’s got a gentleman friend that was hanging around here late last night.\(^\text{103}\)

Not only does she comment on a possible tragic end of one of the characters, but she also refers obliquely to Mr. Easter’s seduction song, “Wouldn’t You Like to Be on Broadway?” Second, all the neighbors return to the same state they were in at the musical’s beginning. They reprise their opening song about the unbearable heat. Finally, the atmosphere of the neighborhood returns to that of the beginning through the movement onstage as the curtain falls. The script indicates:

Henry and the man come up the cellar steps, and he conducts the couple into the house. A sailor approaches with two girls. They stroll across, as the curtain begins to fall slowly.\(^\text{104}\)

New York City’s pulse and fast pace does not allow its residents to mull over the tragic event for long.

Mandel’s and Krook’s theories stress that these episodes have an emotional purpose rather than a dramatic one. After a tragedy takes place, the ensuing episode concerns consequences (either for another main character, like Maria and Giorgio, or a secondary one, such as Sam and Rose), concludes the subplot, re-establishes order, and allows for an affirmation of the universality of human experience. The post-tragic episode in *Street Scene*, *West Side Story*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Passion* explore the human values that the tragic story has just examined.

\(^{103}\) Rice and Hughes, 91.

\(^{104}\) Ibid.
6. Conclusion

Modern dramatic theory has gone beyond Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The musical, having developed from many genres of acting and singing, has different qualities than the dramatic form that Aristotle theorized. Elements distinct from Aristotle include a subplot, a chorus that acquires functions similar to those of a Greek chorus, songs that provide a foil for tragedy (mainly in their orchestral accompaniment), moments of comic relief (which may resemble Greek satyrs, although Aristotle does not mention comic relief in his *Poetics*), and a post-tragic episode with an affirmation of human values. Even if these elements do not appear in all of the musicals discussed above (the only musical to feature all these non-Aristotelian elements is *Sweeney Todd*), at least one of these elements contributes to analyze those five Broadway musicals and their tragic characters through the aesthetics of tragedy. These elements appear in tandem with Aristotle’s notion of *hamartia* and of a complex plot in order to reach the tragic denouement.
Conclusion

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals.
—William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, scene 2

This study has shown that Street Scene, West Side Story, Sweeney Todd, Miss Saigon, and Passion share a set of characteristics from Aristotle’s observations on Greek tragedy. In all of them, a character reacts to circumstances, commits hamartia intending to achieve something for her or himself, recognizes that his or her actions have led to the opposite of what s/he expected, and finally faces bad luck near the end of the drama. This structure, however, could also be applied to comic plays. Aristotle’s writings on comedy have unfortunately been lost, but one could imagine a comic character going through hamartia, recognition, and reversal, but reaching good luck at the end. Desiree in Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s A Little Night Music accepts to “help” Frederick given that his second wife is still a virgin after eleven months of marriage. Their reencounter leads to Desiree rediscovering old and forgotten feelings, making her realize that she acted foolishly by accepting Frederick back in her life. However, events develop in a positive way for her. Anne, Frederick’s second wife, leaves him for his son, and Desiree finds a happy ending by his side. Comedy originally derived from tragedy, and even if its aim is humor and to exaggerate any tragic elements, comedy has retained some of tragedy’s elements. Comic plays concern the character’s saga in a less formal way than tragedy, the lines (or lyrics) can simply imply irony. In addition, the characters’ personalities differ from their tragedy counterparts. But ultimately both genres tend to reify Aristotle’s observations on drama.
In this conclusion, I argue how Aristotelian elements from tragedy distance Street Scene, West Side Story, Sweeney Todd, Miss Saigon, and Passion from more typical musical theater plays. First, I draw a comparison on how comic and tragic characters face anguish. Second, I discuss how critics have considered these musicals’ tragic plots to be innovative in musical theater history. Third, I demonstrate that, unlike comedy, these musicals have endings that leave aspects of the plot unanswered and open-ended.

As with tragedy, comedy features some type of suffering. Comic characters also have their burdens, doubts, and the need to express them at some point in the play. Tragic characters use suffering as a means to hopefully transform their lives. Because they suffer, they strive for something different, which they believe will ease the pain. Comic characters, on the other hand, learn to live with suffering. The transformation that the tragic character strives for would be somewhat absurd for a comic character. Satires poke fun at the tragic character’s plight of fighting against the odds in order to fulfill some inner burden or anxiety. Therefore, comic characters put up with their suffering, rather than concealing it, but do not express it as intensely as a tragic character typically does. In addition, after reversal and recognition, the comic protagonist still has time to correct whatever wrong s/he made and thus avoids a clash with bad luck. In musical theater, the final song in most cases reprises the protagonist’s happiness; however, musicals cannot ignore some suffering from the protagonist’s perspective. As Walter Kerr has written, “even at the lightest level, the thwack of a slapstick hurts.”¹

Nellie Forbush, the protagonist of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s 1949 musical South Pacific, exemplifies a character in a musical comedy who nearly suffers a tragedy. Her hamartia appears when she displays prejudice against the race of Emile’s first wife and the

mother of his children at the end of the first act. Her recognition and reversal occur in the second act, when she learns that Emile is missing from the mission against the Japanese. Alone on stage, she says: “I know what counts now. You. All those other things—the woman you had before—her color. What piffle! What a pinhead I was. Come back so I can tell you.” Her reprise of “Some Enchanted Evening” puts her realization into song as she fears the worst about Emile. In a tragic-like gesture, using Emile’s words, she regrets having “let him go”: “Some enchanted evening, when you find your true love, when you feel him call you across a crowded room, then fly to his side and make him your own, or all through your life you may dream all alone.” Instead of concluding with “once you have found him, never let him go,” she utters, “Don’t die, Emile.” But Nellie still has a chance to correct her “wrong” and goes to Emile’s house to look after his children now that their father is missing. She seems to have decided to live with the anxiety of not knowing whether Emile is dead or alive and focuses on the children’s welfare instead. Her dialogue and reprise of “Dite Moi” with young Jerome and Ngama in the final scene demonstrates that Nellie has overcome her prejudice and has begun to accept the children. The musical ends with a clash with good luck as Emile, having survived the mission, returns and joins in the number.

In the 1950 musical comedy *Guys and Dolls*, creators Frank Loesser, Jo Swerling, and Abe Burrows introduced some acute suffering for the character of Adelaide. Her *hamartia* is accepting Nathan’s promises that they will one day get married. When the musical begins, he has

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3 Ibid.

4 Cable’s saga, on the other hand, is a tragic one. He understands his prejudice in “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” and claims that if he survives the mission, he will not return to the United States. But he does not have time to fulfill that promise as he dies on the mission.
been procrastinating about getting married for fourteen years. “Adelaide’s Lament” (and also its reprise) represents a form of recognition. Adelaide sings about an experience that torments her (“a long frustration” that can develop into “the flu, a cough, and la grippe”). But the song also indicates that the comic character has learned to live with such anxiety, precisely what makes her break into song. Loesser’s song does not allow her to sing about something that propels her to make a change, but prompts the audience to laugh at her suffering. The humor of her lament derives from the manner in which she expresses herself with references to catching a cold as a consequence of not getting married and her sneezes that conclude the the song. As scholar Thomas Riis has written, a good performance of this song “confirms Adelaide’s intensity, sincerity, and self-assertion in a way that resembles a blues plaint’s emotional honesty. Audiences don’t just laugh at Adelaide. They cheer her tenacity and her passion, which somehow has survived a fourteen-year engagement complicated by maladies of the eye, ears, nose, and throat.”\(^\text{5}\) After Adelaide realizes that Nathan will not change, she sings “Marry the Man Today.” This song reveals Adelaide’s opportunity to avoid tragedy and “to marry the man today and change his ways tomorrow.”\(^\text{6}\) At the end of the show, she celebrates their marriage during the song “Guys and Dolls,” her clash with good luck, and the consequence of taking matters into her own hands.

Tevye, from the 1964 musical Fiddler on the Roof, represents another comic character whose saga brings some suffering. He commits hamartia as he accepts the changing times, and allows Tzeitel and Hodel to break with tradition and choose their own husbands. This makes his third daughter, Chava, believe that her love for a Roman Catholic man could be possible despite

\(\text{\^{5}}\) Thomas Riis, Frank Loesser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 94.

her Jewish heritage. When Chava asks to marry Fyedka, Tevye refuses, which causes Chava and Fyedka to elope. The Ballet “Chavaleh” depicts Tevye’s pain as he sees his daughters dancing out of his reach with men of their choice. Tevye understands his hamartia when Chava appears after the ballet begging her father to bless her marriage. Unlike his decision for his two other daughters, Tevye now chooses faith and tradition:

TEVYE. (to heaven) Accept them? How can I accept them? Can I deny everything I believe in? On the other hand, can I deny my own child? On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try to bend that far, I will break. On the other hand…there is no other hand. No Chava. No-no-no!7

No daughter of Tevye’s will ever marry outside the faith, and he refuses her request. He learns to live with the suffering of denying one of his daughters and focuses on their departure from Anatevka. But Tevye has a chance to escape his suffering. Not that the end of this musical is happy with the Jews being forced to leave their hometown, but as far as Tevye’s relationship with his daughters is concerned, Fiddler on the Roof ends happily. Before leaving Anatevka, when Chava and Fyedka come to say goodbye, Tevye’s words of “God be with you”8 give Chava a glimmer of hope that he has not rejected her.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carousel (1945) provides one final example of the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Hammerstein’s book contains several tragic elements. Joining Jigger to rob Mr. Bascombe marks Billy Bigelow’s hamartia, and the botched job causes him to stab himself during the robbery. But death is not the end of the protagonist’s saga in Carousel, and Billy has a chance to redeem himself. As the Starkeeper announces, Billy can go down to earth one more time and “do [his] little daughter some good.”9 At first, he fails with his daughter,
Louise. He slaps her when she refuses the star he had offered her as a gift. But the star causes his widowed wife, Julie, to perceive his presence. Even if she cannot see him, she is able to grab the star in her hands. Billy succeeds in doing something good for his wife, but he suffers for being too late, and he reprises the song “If I loved You.” Hammerstein reveals Billy’s suffering by changing the tense with which he had sung their song in the first act:

Longing to tell you,
But afraid and shy,
I let my golden chances pass me by.
Now I’ve lost you;
Soon I will go in the mist of day,
And you never will know
How I loved you,
How I loved you.10

The conditional “if” is no longer present. Billy did love Julie, but he doubts that she will ever know.

Billy encounters good luck in the final scene during Louise’s graduation. He redeems himself for having slapped her as his spirit tells her to listen close to Dr. Seldon’s words. When he says: “Don’t be held back by their [your parents’] failures! Makes no difference what they did or didn’t do. You jest stand on yer own two feet,” Billy whispers to Louise: “Listen to him. Believe him.” And she “looks up suddenly” and “joins the others as they sing.”11 Billy has atoned for his wrong by convincing Louise that his troubled past should not hold her back. At the curtain, Billy succeeds in telling Julie that he loved her. Again, music implies his redemption. It is not until his “I loved you, Julie. Know that I loved you!” that she starts singing the message of hope from “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” a song she had not been able to finish after Billy’s death. The message “you’ll never walk alone” concludes the show, and the protagonist clashes with

10 Ibid., 172.
11 Ibid., 176–77.
some good luck as he works to atone his wrongs. Despite the hopeful ending, Julie and Billy have still been separated by death.

Tragedy gives its characters more freedom than comedy. Comic characters tolerate suffering and by the drama’s denouement are usually reunited with their romantic partners. Thus, a comic character would not harm himself or herself after realizing a prejudice, enduring fourteen years of engagement, or breaking with tradition. Tragic characters, on the other hand, cannot endure suffering and because they want to quell it, they acquire more freedom, leading them to commit adultery, murder, or suicide. The magnitude of their actions are so great that they have no time to correct their past mistakes. Walter Kerr explains: “we have a habit of thinking that “tragic” means “sorry” or “doomed” or “morally guilty”; it means “free.”\footnote{Kerr, 128.}

In addition, comedy does not elevate or affirm mankind to the same degree that tragedy does. Nellie knows Emile was missing, not dead; Adelaide knows she has time to change her future husband’s ways; Tevye suggests that he may reconcile with Chava one day; and Billy experiences divine intervention to facilitate his redemption. These “musical comedies” do not dismiss the comic characters’ reasoning, for they depict actions based on the human condition. But tragedy causes the protagonist to face bad luck and question his or her own actions and celebrates the tragic character’s powers of reason. Mrs. Maurrant’s, Tony’s and Maria’s, Sweeney Todd’s, Kim’s, and Giorgio’s tragedy results from their own actions and the absence of hope and a second chance. \textit{Street Scene}, \textit{West Side Story}, \textit{Sweeney Todd}, \textit{Miss Saigon}, and \textit{Passion} indeed reflect what Hamlet most admires in man: infinite faculties.

The tragic emplotment of these characters’ human condition played a role in the critics’ notion that these five musicals were innovative for their own time. Indeed, each of these
musicals distinguished themselves from other examples of the genre because of their tragic plots. On the morning after *Street Scene* premiered, critics commented on this aspect of the musical. Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times* wrote: “[Weill] has listened to the main street cries of Mr. Rice’s garish fable—the hopes, anxieties, and grief of people trying to beat a humane existence out of a callous city.” John Chapman wrote at the *Daily News* that *Street Scene* was “a work of great individuality which makes no compromise with Broadway formula.”

*West Side Story*’s plot and tragic ending also caught the attention of critics. Atkinson wrote about it in the *New York Times* in 1960, after the show re-opened on Broadway:

> To persons whose idea of the musical was conditioned by *My Fair Lady*, the severity of *West Side Story* came almost as an affront. Boy does not get girl. . . . In 1957, who would have thought that a harsh drama about juvenile crime on the scabrous sidewalks of New York would win the respect and admiration of so many thousands of theatergoers, not only in America but abroad? . . . Abandoning the clichés of Broadway, [the creators] have composed a unique work.

*Sweeney Todd*, too, stood out from the conventions of Broadway musicals. Clive Barnes wrote in the *Washington Post* in 1979:

> It was certainly different and arguably terrific. It was not your ordinary little Broadway musical—not by any means. It was *Sweeney Todd*. . . . Unusual, yes. Not only does it have the first heroine to be incinerated since Joan of Arc, but the show ends with as many dead bodies as *Hamlet*, and during its course many of the gentlemen of the chorus are eaten in the shape of meat pies. . . . *Sweeney Todd* is indeed different.

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14 Ibid.


Originally produced in London, *Miss Saigon*’s critics claimed that it had brought innovation to the musical theater stage. Jack Tinker from the *Daily Mail* wrote:

> [Miss Saigon] has the power to move one to tears at the mess Mankind can inflict upon itself and also to fill the heart fit to burst with the simple nobility of its heroine’s capacity to rise above it. I can think of few modern musicals which can make this claim, and I speak as one of the few that found *Les Miz* most mizzable.  

New York critics, although critical of the 1980s’ British invasion on Broadway and these works’ reliance on spectacle, did not minimize the impact of *Miss Saigon*’s tragic plot. Ken Mandelbaum in *Theater Week* wrote: “*Miss Saigon* is the first pop opera about simple, real characters, and it tells a straightforward story, setting its intimate scenes against a spectacle that is always integral to the action and that serves to emphasize the theme of ordinary people in the grip of chaotic events beyond their control.”

In addition, scholars and critics have claimed that these musical’s plots and musical settings border on opera. Kurt Weill initially labeled *Street Scene* a “dramatic musical,” but for the published piano-vocal score the composer retitled it “An American Opera.” Weill purposely employed the style of opera to heighten the tragedy, as Bruce McClung has claimed: “the heightened musical language of late nineteenth-century Italian opera tells the central story of betrayal and murder in the Murrant family.” In 1957 the critic for the *Washington Post*, Richard Coe, wrote about *West Side Story*: “Bernstein’s score also speaks to us more subtly: . . .

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through dissonance—in “The Rumble,” a brilliantly staged fight scene, and with skilled musicianship the patterns of grand opera—“Tonight,” an astonishingly intricate quintet.”

Chapman referred to West Side Story as “a bold new kind of musical theater—a juke-box Manhattan opera.”

Jack Kroll, the critic for the Newsweek wrote about Sweeney Todd: “Sondheim has been inching closer and closer to pure opera and Sweeney Todd is the closest he’s come yet.”

Reifying their status as hybrid works, Street Scene and Sweeney Todd have both been produced by operas houses. The English National Opera presented Street Scene in 1989 and the Semper Oper in Dresden performed it in 2011. Opera houses productions of Sweeney Todd include the Houston Grand Opera in 1984, the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2002, and the Royal Opera House in London in 2003. In his later years, composer Leonard Bernstein even came to regard West Side Story in operatic terms and recorded it as such with opera singers José Carreras and Kiri Te Kanawa.

Many American critics considered Miss Saigon closer to opera than most Golden-Age Broadway musicals. David Richards wrote in the New York Times, “What Mr. Boublil and Mr. Schönberg are striving to reproduce, as they did in Les Misérables, is the grandeur of opera in

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popular garb.” Mandelbaum in his review praises this quality of Miss Saigon: “[It] makes perhaps the best case yet for the validity of the pop opera form; if its individual components may be equaled or bettered by other examples of the genre, Saigon is the most dramatically coherent and satisfying of them all.”

Sondheim’s biographer, Meryle Secrest, cited Clive Barnes’s positive regard for the score of Passion: “Once in a extraordinary while, you sit in a theatre and your body shivers with the sense and thrill of something so new, so unexpected that it seems, for those fugitive moments, more like life than art.” Secrest concludes, “Sondheim, his orchestrator, Jonathan Tunick, and Lapine had created ‘the first serious Broadway opera.’” Thus these five musicals’ plots and their musical settings have been sufficient to distinguish them from other musicals, and their tragic elements have contributed to their critical reception.

The plots of these musicals leave certain questions unanswered, an aspect uncommon in the comedic genre. In writing on tragedy, T. R. Henn claimed, “The great tragic endings are . . . the supreme assertions of a unity, a resolution of conflict, that can be terminated in no other way: yet paradoxically not a terminal, but projecting, out of the re-unification which it suggests, the sense of continuity and re-birth.” Indeed, after experiencing these shows on stage, even with some comic relief, audience members may be struck by the tragedy they have witnessed. Comedy brings the plot to a full conclusion. All principal characters reach happy endings, and the audience usually leaves the theater entertained and satisfied that those characters have found

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happiness. Nellie will stay with Emile and his children; Adelaide will marry Nathan; Tevye understands that times are changing, and he ends the story on good terms with his daughters\(^{28}\); and Julie and Louise will “walk on with hope in [their] hearts.”

Tragedy, on the other hand, gives us reasons to think about some characters’ lives, even after the drama has concluded. We can debate what could have been different in their saga or how the tragic incident may have changed the lives of those who witnessed it. *Street Scene* leaves us wondering about the future relationship between Mr. Maurrant and his children. The final scene, as everyone returns to their everyday-lives, poses the question of what will happen to Sam, or whether Willy will become the man his mother wanted him to become. *West Side Story* makes us wonder if Maria will love that much ever again. She gains maturity and learns to hate during the musical. Her raising her head “triumphantly” as the curtain falls invites us to wonder how this tragedy will affect her future choices. In *Miss Saigon* Kim’s death implies that the Engineer will not live his American dream. The musical does not actually propose an end for this character’s saga. Will the Engineer who had sung so much about moving to America, eventually achieve his goal? Will he ever learn that life in America may not be as ideal as he imagines? And finally, *Passion* makes us wonders how much Fosca’s love will change Giorgio in his future relationships.

*Sweeney Todd* is an exception in this regard. It leaves fewer questions unanswered than the others since every character who committed a terrible deed is fatally punished. Todd, who had killed many of the important characters, learns his beloved Lucy was one of his victims and dies. Melodrama answers the remaining questions, namely what might be Johanna’s and Anthony’s future. Being good characters who had only sung about being together, their marriage

\(^{28}\) Although we may wonder about Tevye’s family’s future, where they will eventually move and whether they will ever reunite again.
remains implied, which allows the final scene to focus on the Demon Barber of Fleet Street instead. The tragic characters’ death at the end of these musicals proves to be so decisive for the dramatic effect that an impression of continuity lingers.

Of these five musicals under consideration, only *Miss Saigon* proves to be a complete tragedy. It has no post-tragic episode, no assertion of human values or new insights, and it neglects a resolution for the subplot. Kim’s suicide, final encounter with Chris, and dying in his arms create a devastating tragic effect. The other four musicals present tragic elements, specially the presence of tragic characters whose sagas fit the Aristotelian complex plot, but do not terminate the action with their deaths.

Other musicals that do not appear in this study correlate to Aristotle’s theory on tragedy. Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson’s *Lost in the Stars* was billed as a tragedy on Broadway in 1949, and its protagonist, Reverend Stephen Kumalo, undergoes a tragic saga as he realizes his religious crisis and lies to his wife about their son Absalom’s murder of Arthur Jarvis and subsequent imprisonment. In 1998 composer Jason Robert Brown and playwright Alfred Uhry created the musical *Parade*, based on the real story of Leo Franck, a Jewish factory manager who was accused of raping and killing one of his African-American employees in 1913. The musical depicts Leo as a tragic character who valiantly fights against Atlanta’s media, which vilifies him, but ultimately fails. A group of masked men (a potent reference to the Ku Klux Klan) kidnaps the hero and kills him in the musical’s penultimate scene. A closer connection between Broadway musical theater and Greek tragedy resulted from Michael John LaChiusa’s 1999 musical adaptation of Euripides’ *Medea*. LaChiusa himself wrote the music, lyrics, and the book. He mixed the Greek myth with the practice of voodoo, and titled his adaptation *Marie Christine*, based on the figure of Marie Laveau, a born-free slave who spread the practice of voodoo in New
Orleans during the second half of the nineteenth century. The title character follows Medea’s path, but finds herself in 1899 Chicago. After she learns that her beloved Dante (who, similarly to Jason, sails a ship) has fallen in love with and is engaged to another woman (Helena), Marie Christine poisons the soon-to-be bride and the two sons she had had with Dante. The musical features many different themes (race, religion, politics) and invites audiences to reinterpret tragedy on the modern Broadway stage. These musicals present a collection of attributes in their plots and scores that relate them to the five musicals considered for this study. With their defiance of convention, the creators of these musicals have contributed to the expansion of the genre.

*Street Scene, West Side Story, Sweeney Todd, Miss Saigon,* and *Passion* can be analyzed as tragedies. These musicals subscribe to Aristotle’s observations on what makes a good tragedy: in all five a tragic character commits *hamartia*, experiences moments of reversal and recognition, and encounters bad luck. Not so different from Ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespearean tragedies, these five musicals concern the depiction of human conflict, suffering, and death. They also feature elements that Aristotle did not include in his *Poetics,* but which enhance their tragic agenda. These elements include the subplots, the chorus that functions in a Greek manner, songs that provide a foil for tragedy, songs that function as comic relief, and an affirmation of human values in the post tragic episode. In addition, these five musicals differ from comic Broadway musicals by introducing and dramatizing suffering in the lives of the protagonists, by featuring tragic elements as an innovative aspect in the genre of the musical, and by leaving some unanswered questions as the curtain falls.

Stephen Halliwell has written that the reader of the *Poetics* is “obliged, whether or not we are always consciously aware of it, to discover new paths through [the tradition of its
interpretation]—to participate in the tradition, but also to extend and change it.” 29 This study participates in that tradition by exploring a different genre for Aristotle’s observations on tragedy. The attribution of Aristotle’s discussion to twentieth-century musical theater proposes a new application of the Poetics’s concepts, comporting with what Halliwell suggests all interpreters of the Poetics should combine in their conclusions: indebtedness to and independence from the Poetics. 30


30 Ibid.
Bibliography


**Scores**


**Discography and Video Recordings**


