**The Bowery:**

**An Unavoidable Fall from Fun to Foul**

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The Bowery is a wide avenue in what is today Lower Manhattan. It begins where Fourth Avenue feeds into Cooper Square and runs south for a little over a mile before terminating in Chatham Square (Google Maps 2014; see Appendix A). As a neighborhood, The Bowery would inevitably become a slum, but for much of the 19th century it teetered on the edge of two extremes: between the bums and lowbrow culture that plagued its streets, and the entertainment and nightlife culture that, for a short time, rivaled Broadway. Ultimately, the Bowery fell to the former, resulting in a poverty stricken and crime filled neighborhood. There are many reasons the Bowery went from being the most notable culture capital in the country to being a slum: The street had a bad reputation from the beginning; the audience that Bowery theater managers catered to demanded a specific type of entertainment with which the Bowery became associated; and Broadway’s rise in entertainment success thwarted the melodramas of the Bowery.

The Bowery began humbly, and quite simply. Originally a trail used by Native Americans (as was Broadway), it was renamed by colonists as “De Bouwerij,” or the “farm” in Old Dutch – a track leading from New Amsterdam to the surrounding farms that led a quiet life as a country lane for some time. When cattle drovers started to use it as a highway for their livestock, the Bowery village was born, known first for its taverns (Freeland 1). This is perhaps where the Bowery’s reputation of vice originated, for since its birth it was regarded as “an idyllic spot gone to seed” (Sante 12). By the early 19th century, the entire Lower East Side of Manhattan was a hot spot for German and Irish immigrants, becoming a working-class resort of sorts (Fields 5). It was during this era that the Bowery first established its niche in the city, developing commerce, entertainment, and dwellings that were set apart from the rest of New York.

From the beginning, the Bowery was viewed by many as an immoral neighborhood, though only in the late 19th century did it truly descend into the pits of poverty and vice. Ever since the first tavern opened up in the Bowery village, businesses in the district made less of an effort to be respectable in the eyes of society. It had always been the place with the most leisure establishments—this was a red flag in the eyes of Protestant nativist Americans, because leisure was often associated with illicit activity (Sante 12). This was not helped by the fact that no church ever existed in the Bowery — an achievement that cannot be claimed by any other major street in New York City (Fields 5). The Bowery boasted tattoo parlors, hundreds of pawn shops in which scams were conducted more regularly than honest business, and the black-eye fixer: a makeup artist whose job it was to cover up the bruises and scars that one got from fighting. The Sunday closing law, which required saloons to shutter on Sundays, was practically obsolete in the Bowery by 1870 (Freeland 20). Nighttime on the Bowery presented a fantastic carnival of lights to tourists (McCabe 643), but it was dangerous, for most saloons encouraged their staff to take advantage of customers at night (Morris 36, 51). The Bowery was so unsuitable that a report in 1898 found 99 entertainment establishments on the Bowery, while a mere 14 of the total 99 were deemed ‘respectable’ by the police (Asbury 26). The El Train (short for elevated train), built in 1878, cast a shadow over the large avenue and kept it covered with soot and smoke (Fields 31; see Appendix B), adding to the alluring chaos of the street filled with working-class people (Fields 6). All of these factors played into the coarse, poverty-stricken reputation that the Bowery acquired: it was no place for good Christians.

One of the first and most distinct features of the Bowery was the diversity of the people. It was the most foreign and exotic avenue in a city of aliens, where “you heard foreign language spoken more frequently than English” (Morris 35). Even before the mass immigration to New York City in the mid 19th century, the Bowery was a mixed area. The earliest immigrants were Irish and German, and these two groups dominated the Bowery until the late 1800s, when many German families moved uptown in response to the evident decline of the neighborhood (Adams, 37). Later, Jews, Chinese, and blacks established areas of their respective cultures (Sante 14). In the early 20th century, immigrants of more exotic nationalities settled in the Bowery. One could find French, Spanish, Italian, and Mexican immigrants settled near the Bowery—the Italians and Mexicans came in large numbers later in American history, and these groups were uncommon in America in the early 1800s.

The Bowery was attractive to immigrants because it presented the possibility of belonging in a community of foreigners within a strange new nation. Almost everyone visiting America (aside from the upper classes) made it there at some point, drawn by the appalling and appealing rumors surrounding it. People passing through on ships from Europe and Asia often ended up staying in the Bowery—it was easy to become enchanted with the exciting night life. Many fell into drinking or prostitution, scammed out of their money and whatever future they had hoped for. Many were killed in the early days of the Bowery, often for the clothes on their backs or the money in their pockets (Sante 13). Who would report missing a foreigner travelling alone in a new chaotic city? Regardless of the violence, the Bowery was a destination for immigrants throughout the 19th century, and it represented an eclectic neighborhood in old New York City.

The Bowery b’hoys were some of the most distinctive characters that New York City has ever seen. They were responsible for some of the greatest gang conflicts of the 19th century, such as the Draft Riots of 1863 (Adams 129), thus shaping the public perception of the Bowery immensely. The Bowery b’hoy, despite his name, was not a boy, but an armed and dangerous individual (Morris 35). The fire companies served as the basis for gangs that would emerge, the most prominent one simply called the Bowery Boys (Adams 23). They were Irish immigrants for the most part, and they represented the classic proletariat class in the city: first organizing in fire companies by religion, ancestry, neighborhood, or political affiliation (Sante 77). The fire companies were unprofessional but enthusiastic, and they were the only firemen in the city until after the Civil War. They competed fiercely for fireplugs when at the scene of a fire, and often spent more time fighting over the plugs than they spent putting out the fire (Asbury 30). The Bowery b’hoy had a specific image, wearing a plug hat, high-heeled boots, a silk cravat, and sporting whiskers (Sante 77, Asbury 33; see Appendix C). He also represented the raucous and rough audience that Bowery theaters began catering to, an audience that would soon chase out the working class families who relied on the Bowery for entertainment. The Bowery b’hoy and his g’hal (female companion) loudly endorsed or disapproved of what was happening onstage, and they were great lovers of large-scale, action packed melodramas that constituted a majority of Bowery theater.

The Bowery was, in the mid 19th century, a middle class fairground, filled with lights and theatrical attractions that no working class people, especially not the Bowery b’hoy, could resist. The German immigrants, many of who had been there for a generation already by the mid 19th century, started the first major establishments called beer gardens (Freeland 10). The Atlantic Garden was established in 1858 by German immigrant William Kramer (“Atlantic Garden Changes Its Ways,” NYT). It seated over 1,000 people, and had a respectable reputation of serving mostly German families at first. As the turn of the century approached, thugs and gangsters started bringing in flasks of hard alcohol and chased out the families (Asbury 27). Thus a business with broad appeal was ended by the invasion of bums and gangsters: something that would not be uncommon in the Bowery as it fell into poor shape.

As the beer gardens began popping up in the mid 1800s, the other establishments that defined the Bowery started drawing crowds. Places such as flophouses, groggeries, clip joints, brothels, fire sales, rigged auctions, pawnbrokers, dime museums, cultural entertainment and education, and shooting galleries lined the wide avenue, each claiming that it was the most worthy building in which one could spend his or her hard-earned money. By the end of the Civil War, many other areas in New York City had establishments like these, but never was there such a high concentration of these businesses in one distinct neighborhood, peaking in the 1870s and 1880s. Additionally, the businesses on the Bowery (excluding theater) had a well-deserved reputation for dishonesty and exploitation of their customers. Certain establishments were unique to the Bowery, for example, the “cheap Johns,” which sold low quality goods with most of the store’s merchandise displayed in boxes on the sidewalk out front (Sante 63). Dime museums deflected blows from reformers by claiming that their entertainment doubled as moral education—their twisted and often gruesome displays taught the audience what *not* to do (“American Museum”). The accepted strategy among Bowery salesmen was the rapid fire hard sell—they hooked in customers and literally did not allow them to leave the store until they had purchased something (Sante 64). Frequently, newly purchased goods fell apart immediately after being taken home.

The idea of conning and theatrical salesmanship as an essential facet of commerce created an economy in the Bowery that was unlike any other part of New York—it thrived on lies and false pretenses, and relied entirely on suckers and those down on their luck. Even the pushcarts sold bad fruit (Sante 64). The premise of the Bowery’s economy was instant gratification: low prices and low quality, easy sales and easy money. The establishments and sales techniques were almost more creative than they were fraudulent. This set a standard of lowbrow culture in the Bowery—one that would satisfy the working class with its creativity, seen in the Bowery’s most lucrative industry: theater.

Bowery theater was a largely recognized industry in New York City, earning the street titles such as “the most notorious thoroughfare in the country,” (Fields 4) and such muddled praise as to intrigue anyone who passed through the growing city. In 1752, the Bowery made its first claim to being an entertainment district with the opening of Sperry’s Botanical Gardens (Asbury 23). Its next entertainment-related aspirations were seen in the 1826 opening of the Bowery Theater, which seated 3,000 people (Sante 73). For some time, the enduring Bowery Theater determined the character of the New York City stage. Producers saw that with Shakespeare plays, good actors agreed to participate in their shows, and they got respectable audiences. Actor Junius Brutus Booth was a drunk, and he often deviated from the script, only to be met by overwhelming approval (Sante 74). This approval reflected the changing audience in the Bowery entertainment industry. Small deviations from traditional theater, for example changing the storylines and scripts, allowed producers to test what played well among audiences. As the German middle class family audience was slowly moving uptown in the 1830s (Sante 74), entertainers saw that they needed to captivate the attention of the rowdier, working-class audience that now replaced the middle class as the audience for their shows. This resulted in a mass change in Bowery theater:

Awhile after 1840, the character of the Bowery as hitherto described completely changed. Cheap prices and vulgar programmes came in…there was more or less rankness in the crowd even then…there never were audiences that paid a good actor or an interesting play the compliment of more sustain’d attention or quicker rapport.” (Whitman 192).

Poet Walt Whitman saw firsthand the change that came about in the Bowery, attributing the change to the crowd’s disposition. Managers began looking for money to fund large-scale productions — this tested best with lower class audiences — so the scramble for funds became more important than the art of the business (a common theme in the Bowery). Bowery b’hoys became actors not because they could act, but because it brought in more b’hoy customers (Adams 39). Nuance and wit were replaced by spectacle, and the Bowery lost the creative edge that once captivated working class audiences. The physical appearance of the productions became more important than the acting and writing (Sante 77).

The main factor in this change was money: the prospect of dominating the Bowery’s entertainment industry was so appealing, that in the 1860s, there were fifteen theaters in the Bowery all competing for public favor, with the promise of three million dollars in box office profits in a good year of business, making theater the most lucrative business in the Bowery (Morris 63). All of these factors led to the unique melodrama whose popularity in the Bowery was on the rise from the 1850s to the 1880s (Sante 85). With such a booming theater industry, it seemed that the Bowery would survive forever as a paragon of lowbrow amusement and spectacle.

The Bowery seemed an excellent destination for middle class entertainment in the mid 19th century, but it was destined to fail when Broadway broke into the theater industry. From 1900 to the present, Broadway has been a world-renowned theater district. Yet Broadway’s famous emphasis on theater started in a familiar place:

If the art and business of modern Broadway could be said to have a specific birthplace, it was in the Bowery, in its dime museums, dance halls, and beer gardens, and its date of birth was in the early 1880s. The Bowery was Broadway’s antithesis; they were opposite sides of the same coin (Fields 4).

Fields recognizes that the Bowery was the inspiration for Broadway, though Broadway eventually tried to distance itself from the Bowery’s type of entertainment. The metaphor ‘opposite sides of the same coin’ refers to both neighborhoods specializing in entertainment while acknowledging the great difference between the types of entertainment offered in each district. Before Broadway became an entertainment industry giant, the Bowery was the city’s theater district, putting on Shakespeare plays and emulating the London stage at the Bowery Theater (Sante 73). How, then, did Broadway come to be so much more successful than the Bowery? Before Broadway was an entertainment center, it had success in other industries, predominantly with clothing and luxury goods sales. It presented a classy alternative to the Bowery’s cheap, low quality goods, and this attracted the upper classes. A popular slogan on the Bowery was “Broadway goods at Bowery prices” (Fields 17), showing how Broadway already had a reputation for quality.

In the early 1880s, as the gap between rich and poor was stretching to new distances, Broadway took off (Fields 4). It’s possible to argue that it started with the opening of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883, which attracted the nouveau riche audience that had become bored with the Bowery’s increasingly coarse and repetitive melodramas (Sante 88). The theaters opening on Broadway could afford to appeal to the bourgeoisie of New York because, unlike the Bowery’s immigrant audience, there was no language barrier. In fact, Broadway theaters made the conscious decision to cater to educated audiences who wanted more than a circus of the masses (Sante 72). They associated themselves with quality, and thus were a “better” alternative to the Bowery, attracting working class families and challenging the standard of entertainment in the late 19th century.

Broadway audiences set themselves apart from the Bowery to enforce the class system. Lola Montez was a sex symbol who had a hugely successful play on the Bowery, appealing to the Bowery Theater’s mostly masculine audiences, who craved sex and dismissed subtlety (Morris 65). When her show moved to Broadway it was a flop, because the audience found it trite and obvious. Part of the Bowery’s issue in entertainment was that its diverse audience had nothing in common with the rest of the people of New York City. As the success of Broadway moved further uptown, all successful businesses aimed to move with it (Sante 89). In 1864, Tony Pastor opened a clean theater on the Bowery, in which he did not tolerate drinking or smoking. He allowed women in for free on Fridays, with the hope of making his theater a working-class family theater (Sante 85, Fields 34; see Appendix D). He had great success with his clean theater—so much success that he moved uptown, once again moving a successful business out of the lowly Bowery once he got the chance. The comedic team Harrigan and Hart was another example of an act that moved uptown to its own theater at the first signs of success. Additionally, Harrigan and Hart were realists: they had no interest in the fanciful spectacles on the Bowery, so their act went over very well once they moved uptown (Sante 87). Saloons, bars, and shops that achieved success made it their goal to get out of the Bowery and get over to Broadway, leaving nothing but unsuccessful stores in their wake. Essentially, Broadway was the catalyst that led to the demise of the Bowery.

The quality of Bowery theater decreased exponentially from its inception, adding to the appeal of Broadway. This makes sense once one understands the audience and the lifestyle that was being catered to. It seems that the most obvious reason for this decline is that Broadway stole any shred of success achieved in the Bowery (i.e. Tony Pastor’s theater). The more specific and accurate reason for this, however, is the needs of the audience that the Bowery was catering to. The melodrama was a type of play unique to the Bowery with a notable “blood and thunder” element, which referred to over-the-top special effects, and spectacles including disasters and triumphs of biblical proportions. Often the success of the show depended upon how violent it was (Sante 85). The scripts and often the actors were terrible— spectators saw these shows as a sport to cheer on rather than as a performing art (Sante 85). Lewd shows also worked their way into the mix— for a largely masculine audience, it was inevitable. The sex and violence incorporated into Bowery productions was a direct response to the audience that producers were catering to.

The uneducated immigrant population that made up the audience in the Bowery explains the nature of the type of entertainment that developed. The physical nature of the shows reflected the language barrier: there was no common first language in the Bowery, so subtleties within the English language didn’t play as well as on Broadway. This was one reason why vaudeville and dime museums were so popular on the Bowery. Dime museums were inexpensive novelty shows that usually displayed grotesque and sensational human freaks, animals, or violent wax dioramas (Fields 7). These purely visual experiences required nothing of the viewer— no common language or heritage was needed to understand the displays of gore and wonder—and many claimed to be educational (“American Museum”). In an area that contained 200,000 vastly diverse people per square mile in the 1880s (Fields 4), the entertainment in the Bowery would have failed miserably had it emulated Broadway’s subtle humor. Producers and managers catered to their audience using the only tools they could to entertain people who had no common background.

Bowery theater declined in quality not only because it needed to entertain an enormously diverse audience, but also because it had the pressure of making sense of the perilous and difficult lives of the working class. The large spectacles of the Bowery often emulated real-life crime scenarios that occurred in the city (Fields 21). The difference between the plays and the news stories, however, is that the plays always featured a happy ending. This showed the wishful thinking on the part of the audience. Their lives were so filled with hardship and violence that when they looked for entertainment, they needed to see morality rewarded and evil punished. They used the Bowery’s theater as a lens to see a simple and righteous world amid the brutally complex and unjust reality they lived in (Fields 21). For these same reasons, slapstick and satire were popular in the Bowery. These forms of comedy allowed people living in poverty to laugh at life’s pleasures and life’s cruelties—theater was a coping mechanism for the harsh lives dealt out to the poor living on the Bowery.

The final years of the 19th century marked the end of even slightly engaging theater in the Bowery. The competition of Broadway was overwhelming to the increasingly repetitive and unimaginative Bowery theater, and by the 1890s, Broadway had vastly overtaken the Bowery in holding a franchise on popular entertainment in the city (Sante 89). The remaining entertainment industry was nearly saved by the arriving ethnic groups; for example, Yiddish theater became prominent on the Bowery as the Yiddish immigration increased at the turn of the 20th century. Vaudeville acts also kept theater on the Bowery going for some time (Sante 91). This was not enough to keep the Bowery on top, for its unchanging entertainment options were certainly less attractive than the Broadway chorus girls who appeared in Ziegfeld’s Follies in the early 20th century, and the plays lacked the exuberance and enthusiasm of the early Bowery melodramas (Sante 95). There were sex scandals surrounding the increasingly obscene burlesque and striptease stars, and even the dime museums were becoming less imaginative and more sexualized (Morris 54, Sante 76; see Appendix E). The Bowery was done for when it lost theater, its million-dollar industry, in the late 1800s.

By the early 1900s, the Bowery was in miserable condition. The museums and auction rooms of the old Bowery had vanished, having moved uptown. Movie houses and kinetoscope parlors were quickly replacing theatrical spectacles, taking their great success uptown as well (Sante 101). They were replaced by the dive bar. More treacherous than any other establishment on the Bowery, dives combined any and all vices and put them under one roof. One notorious dive was McGuirk’s Suicide Hall, which boasted that more women had killed themselves under its roof than in any other establishment in the country (Asbury 320). This linking of violence and sex quickened the rate of the Bowery’s decline—it seemed to encourage being bad. Naturally, this attracted gangsters, bums, and people down on their luck.

The “bad is good” sentiment was most exemplified by the criminals and gangsters who frequented the Bowery (Asbury 322). One might argue that long-standing poverty and gang violence were more primary causes of the Bowery becoming New York City’s famous skid row than the decline of entertainment. However, there were many other areas in the city in which gangs ran rampant and immigrants lived in poverty. In the Bowery, this low standard of achievement was rewarded and encouraged by the lowbrow culture, leading to inevitable decline. The dives made it easy for bums to get into a cycle of poverty and substance abuse. In one dive, for example, the hot punch served to customers was a medley of whiskey, hot rum, camphor, benzene, and cocaine sweepings. In John Kelly’s dive, there were instances in which men were carried directly from the bar to die in the alcoholic wing of the nearby hospital (Asbury 321). By 1909, an estimated 25,000 bums were wandering the streets in the Bowery neighborhood (Sante 317).

The slum-like nature of the Bowery made it comparable to Calcutta, housing 120,000 people in a five-block span. Rents were driven up by new construction projects, and the sewage and clean water systems in the area were practically nonexistent. Garbage removal was irregular, and fires ravaged the neighborhood almost completely unchecked (Fields 16). In 1898 there were over 99 houses of entertainment on the Bowery, and by 1926, there remained less than a dozen low-quality burlesque, Chinese, Italian, and Yiddish theaters (Asbury 26). The Bowery’s rapid decline in the 1890s was complete merely a decade later, when the neighborhood was reduced to a poverty-stricken slum.

The Bowery led an erratic and troubled life, claiming notoriety and attention from the masses for much of its existence, but petering out in a slow and exhausted manner over the course of a century. Rather than rivaling Broadway in terms of entertainment, the Bowery became a slum — something that was inevitable. Many factors contributed to this inevitability, the most prominent being that the audience demanded a specific type of entertainment with which the Bowery became associated, the lowbrow culture in the neighborhood kept any honest establishments from being successful, and Broadway’s rise in entertainment success thwarted the cheap tricks of the Bowery. For some time, the entertainment industry in the Bowery achieved the impossible: it provided leisure activities for a group so diverse that there was no common language among them. The demise of the Bowery as an entertainment district reflects how quickly New York City moves on. The Bowery, its theater, and its inhabitants in all their shady splendor have been largely forgotten by time.

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