The Song of the Shirt

POEM TEXT

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt."

"Work! work! work!
While the cock is crowing aloof!
And work—work—work,
Till the stars shine through the roof!
It's O! to be a slave
Along with the barbarous Turk,
Where woman has never a soul to save,
If this is Christian work!

"Work—work—work
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work—work—work
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!

"O, Men, with Sisters dear!
O, Men! with Mothers and Wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch—stitch—stitch,
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
Sewing at once with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt.

"But why do I talk of Death?
That Phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear its terrible shape,
It seems so like my own—
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
Oh! God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!

"Work—work—work!
My Labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread—and rags.
That shatter'd roof—and this naked floor—
A table—a broken chair—
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there!

"Work—work—work!
From weary chime to chime,
Work—work—work!
As prisoners work for crime!
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Till the heart is sick, and the brain benumb'd,
As well as the weary hand.

"Work—work—work,
In the dull December light,
And work—work—work,
When the weather is warm and bright—
While underneath the eaves
The brooding swallows cling
As if to show me their sunny backs
And twit me with the spring.

"O! but to breathe the breath
Of the cowslip and primrose sweet—
With the sky above my head,
And the grass beneath my feet
For only one short hour
To feel as I used to feel,
Before I knew the woes of want
And the walk that costs a meal!

"O! but for one short hour!
A respite however brief!
No blessed leisure for Love or Hope,
But only time for Grief!

A little weeping would ease my heart,
But in their briny bed
My tears must stop, for every drop
Hinders needle and thread!"

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch,—
Would that its tone could reach the Rich!—
She sang this "Song of the Shirt!"

SUMMARY

A woman with tired, worn-out fingers and drooping, bloodshot eyes, wearing unflattering and tattered clothes, sat sewing. She stitched, and stitched! She was poor and hungry and dirty, and she sang sadly to herself, singing the "Song of the Shirt."

"I'm always working! When the roosters crow, I'm working, and I'm still working when night falls. Oh! I'm a slave, just like the uncivilized Turks. They might call this 'Christian' work, but I don't even have a soul worth saving.

"I'm always working, until I can't think straight, and I can hardly see anything. All I can see are the materials I'm sewing together, and when I fall asleep, I keep on sewing while I dream.

"Men, you have sisters, mothers, and wives! You are wearing us out when you make us stitch together these clothes. We are poor, and hungry, and dirty, sewing our way straight to death.

"Death doesn't scare me, though, because I look just like its ghostly, boney form. I hardly eat—bread is so hard to come by, and my labor brings in hardly any money.

"I'm always working! I can't stop laboring, but what do I gain? All I have are a straw bed, some crusty bread, and tattered clothes. My roof is broken, and my floor is bare. I've got a table, a broken chair, and a wall so bare that I'm grateful when my shadow falls on it.

"I'm always working! The clock chimes wearily, and I work like prisoners paying for their crimes. All I can see are the materials I'm sewing together, and my heart and mind feel as sick and numb as my hand.

"I'm always working, throughout the dark winter and into the warm, sunny spring. Birds hang on the roof and taunt me with their happy song.

"Oh! All I want is to smell sweet flowers and feel the sky above me, the grass under my feet. I just want one hour of that happiness, which I used to know before I became poor and had to work so hard for food.

"Oh! I only want one hour of rest. I don't even need to experience pleasure—I just want time to cry. To cry would be a relief, but I can't cry while working because tears will interfere with my work."

A woman with tired, worn-out fingers and drooping, bloodshot eyes, wearing unflattering and tattered clothes, sat sewing. She stitched, and stitched! She was poor and hungry and dirty, and she sang sadly to herself—if only the rich could hear!—this "Song of the Shirt."

THEMES

POVERTY AND LABOR IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

"The Song of the Shirt" spotlights the experiences of Victorian England's working poor. The subject of the poem is a seamstress who works ceaselessly in inhumane, even torturous conditions simply to get by. This unending labor fills her with deep despair and hopelessness, even as "the Rich" remain oblivious to these struggles of the working class. Through the woman's song, the poem seeks to expose the burdens of poverty and the dehumanizing labor conditions faced by poor workers in 19th-century England.

The seamstress's song emphasizes the repetitive, monotonous, and utterly exhausting nature of her labor. She complains that she works from morning, when the rooster crows, to night, when the stars shine, and that all day she can't take even "one short hour" of rest. She doesn't even have time to cry, she sings, because crying will slow her work. Ultimately, the seamstress works so long that she falls asleep over the buttons she sews, only to then keep on working "in a dream."

All this work takes an immense physical and mental toll on the seamstress. Her fingers are "weary and worn" while her "eyelids [are] heavy and red." She feels like the "brooding swallows" outside taunt her, singing that they "twit me with the spring"—mocking her while she's trapped inside her "blank" and unpleasant room. Her heart and mind, meanwhile, have grown "sick" and numb. Working to survive is, ironically, draining the seamstress of her very life: she says that she's "Sewing at once, with a double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt"—in other words, preparing for her own funeral—and beginning to look like the "terrible shape" of death itself.

The seamstress's misery, the poem implies, is the product of a society that values human life less than material goods—that treats "flesh and blood" as "cheap." Those who buy her clothes pay no heed to the fact that it's "not linen" they're "wearing out" but rather "human creatures' lives"—in other words, they don't

know or care that they're benefitting from the torturous, endless labor of people in poverty. The seamstress even compares herself to a "slave," indicating that she feels like society treats her as sub-human. Instead, she is a "creature" or a "prisoner" without "a soul to save."

By recording the seamstress's song, the speaker of "The Song of the Shirt" thus exposes how miserable, dirty, and inhumane life can be for the working poor. Writing at the end, "Would that its tone could reach the Rich," the speaker suggests that if others only listened to and cared about the seamstress, they might realize that people like her need—and indeed deserve—relief from the torments of poverty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-89

GENDER INEQUALITY IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

The poor seamstress at the heart of "The Song of the Shirt" believes that her life is all the more difficult because she is a woman struggling to provide for herself in a society that devalues women's labor. While the poem predominantly focuses on the burdens of poverty in general, Hood also suggests that those burdens are distributed unequally; Victorian society placed a premium on traditional femininity (especially physical beauty, grace, and obedience) and granted women fewer opportunities to become independent or self-sufficient—making it all the more difficult for those women who had to work to support themselves and their families.

The subject of the poem toils over the kind of work (sewing clothing by hand) that many poverty-stricken women had to perform to survive in the 19th century. Hood in fact wrote the poem in honor of a widow named Mrs. Biddell, who sewed clothes and pawned the clothing she made in order to feed her starving children. The seamstress in the poem likewise constantly works her "needle and thread," obsessing over "seam, and gusset, and band," because this is the only way she can support herself. The seamstress doesn't mention if she has children, but she does blame men for burdening her and other women with this tedious work, crying, "O, men, with sisters dear! / O, men, with mothers and wives!" She suggests that while women must work to feed their families, men often don't realize—or care—how much their wives and sisters suffer as a result of these burdens.

Because she works so hard, slaving over needle and thread, the seamstress seems to lose what makes her a woman. In the first and last stanzas, the speaker describes the seamstress as a "woman" in "unwomanly rags." The seamstress obviously can't take care of her physical appearance: she can hardly feed herself, let alone try to look "womanly." The seamstress also complains that her work makes her feel like less than a woman—indeed, less than a human being. She claims that "human creatures' lives" get worn out by these horrible, impoverished conditions. Lack of food and rest make the seamstress look like death itself, a "phantom of grisly bone." Evidently, the physical toll of the seamstress's work is almost more than she can endure.

Ultimately, "The Song of the Shirt" demonstrates that very poor women must bear such extreme burdens that they cease to really be women at all (in a Victorian sense of the word, that is), becoming instead "benumbed" and "weary" slaves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 34-38
- Lines 83-85

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt."

In the first stanza, the speaker introduces the subject of the poem: a seamstress who is evidently very poor and distressed. The speaker will relay the seamstress's song throughout the rest of the poem, so this opening stanza provides the first (and really the only) chance to see her from an observer's perspective. The specific imagery in this stanza sets the scene, allowing the reader to envision the woman as she sings her "Song of the Shirt."

Clearly, the woman is exhausted and unhappy. The speaker describes how her fingers are "weary and worn," her "eyelids heavy and red," and she wears "unwomanly rags"—tattered, unattractive clothes. And not only does her body show signs of physical distress, but the speaker notes that she works "In poverty, hunger, and dirt" and that her voice is "dolorous," or deeply sad.

The repetitive sounds of the stanza emphasize the woman's dismal state. Note, for example, the alliteration of "weary and worn" and the assonance of "heavy and red," sonic devices that draw readers' attention to the seamstress's exhaustion. The polyptoton of "woman" and "unwomanly," meanwhile,

illustrates how the woman's labor has robbed her of gentleness and beauty. And the quick epizeuxis of "Stitch! stitch! stitch!" evokes the endless, monotonous nature of the seamstress's labor.

The poem's rhyme scheme also reflects the fact that this is a "song." This opening stanza of eight lines can be broken down into two quatrains, or four-line stanzas, that follow the rhyme schemes ABCB DEDE.

While the poem's meter varies quite a bit, most of the feet here are iambs (da-DUMs) or anapests (da-da-DUMs) (with occasional trochees, DUM-das, thrown in). Notice the repetitive, bouncy rhythm of lines 1-4, for example:

> With fin- | gers wea- | ry and worn,
> With eye- | lids hea- | vy and red,
> A wo- | man sat, | in unwo- | manly rags,
> Plying | her need- | le and thread—

The poem's meter works with the alternating rhyme pattern to lend music and rhythm to the speaker's tale.

LINES 9-16

"Work! work! work!
While the cock is crowing aloof!
And work—work—work,
Till the stars shine through the roof!
It's O! to be a slave
Along with the barbarous Turk,
Where woman has never a soul to save,
If this is Christian work!

The seamstress herself begins singing in stanza 2. Her song opens with an instance of epizeuxis (echoing the speaker's "Stitch! stitch! stitch!" from stanza 1): she exclaims, "Work! work! work!"—expressing right away that her work consumes her thoughts.

In contrast to the opening stanza, the seamstress uses exclamation points repeatedly throughout her song, revealing the depth of her agony and desperation. She complains that she can never take a break from her work: she works in the morning, when "the cock" (or male rooster) "is crowing," and all the way till night, when "stars shine through the roof."

Especially given that later in her song, the seamstress wishes she could experience the joys of nature, these nods to the natural world indicate her desire to live a freer, more pleasurable life, outside the confines of her room. Also note how the sharp alliteration/consonance of "cock" and "crowing" evokes the rooster's harsh morning song.

In the second half of this stanza, the seamstress cries out, "It's O! to be a slave," letting her misery slip out with that dramatic "O!" Evidently, the seamstress's work is so demanding that she feels like a "slave." She then compares herself to "the barbarous Turk," presumably referencing Muslim slaves from the Middle East—an obscure reference today, but one that mainly underscores the seamstress's sense of personal degradation. Her work makes her feel less than human; a slave, who doesn't even have a "soul" worth saving. She complains that even if her work is honest, and in that sense "Christian," it isn't helping her get to heaven; instead, she's trapped in a sort of hell, with little hope of relief.

LINES 17-24

"Work—work—work
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work—work—work
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!

The seamstress again repeats "Work—work—work" in both the first and third lines of stanza 3. At this point, this line starts to feel like a refrain, capturing the seamstress's feeling that all she ever does—all she ever thinks about—is her endless, all-consuming work.

She sings that her "brain begins to swim" from poring over her needle and thread, and her eyes grow "heavy and dim." Clearly, her work tires both her body and mind, making it difficult to continue. But she must continue, repetitively, monotonously, until she even falls asleep over the materials she's sewing. Even in her sleep, however, the seamstress claims that she keeps sewing "in a dream." Whether her hands literally keep sewing as she sleeps, or she simply dreams about sewing, the seamstress suggests that even sleep cannot provide refuge or rest from her work.

In this stanza, the seamstress introduces another kind of repetition, singing, "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam." By repeating the same three words—materials that she uses in sewing clothes—but changing their order (a device called chiasmus), the seamstress emphasizes how these materials dominate every part of her life. Like the words of her song, her work is extremely repetitive, and her life is tedious and painful as a result. This repetition in her song turns her misery into a kind of chant, reflecting the monotony and exhaustion of the working class experience.

LINES 25-32

"O, Men, with Sisters dear!
O, Men! with Mothers and Wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch—stitch—stitch,
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,

Sewing at once with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt.

The seamstress transitions now, using apostrophe to address the men who force women to perform such tedious work. She exclaims, "O, Men, with Sisters dear!" and "O, Men! with Mothers and Wives!"

By repeating her apostrophe to "Men" in the first and second lines of the stanza (an example of anaphora), the seamstress emphasizes her agony. She implies that men are indifferent to the suffering of women, even the women they love like their sisters, mothers, and wives.

In this society, women are forced to bear great burdens, presumably to support their families, and men may not know or care how much they have to toil. The seamstress thus claims that men aren't just "wearing out" linen, or clothes: they are wearing out the "lives" of the "human creatures" who are responsible for creating those clothes. In other words, men consume thoughtlessly, while women waste their lives away to produce the goods necessary to sustain society. (Note, too, how the seamstress says "creatures," reflecting the dehumanization of workers.) The seamstress thus calls attention to the different experiences of men and women in Victorian England, suggesting that poor women suffer disproportionately and work exceedingly hard.

To emphasize this point, the seamstress adds another instance of epizeuxis, repeating the speaker's line from stanza 1: "Stitch—stitch—stitch," the seamstress sings, as if recording the movements of her own hands. Just like in that first stanza, the seamstress complains that she works "In poverty, hunger, and dirt." Now, she adds that she is "Sewing at once with a double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt." In other words, the seamstress believes she is working herself to death; she uses the symbol of the "Shroud" to suggest that every stitch brings her closer to the coffin. For this woman, working and dying are inextricably linked.

LINES 33-40

"But why do I talk of Death?
That Phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear its terrible shape,
It seems so like my own—
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
Oh! God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!

The seamstress opens stanza 5 with a rhetorical question, asking, "But why do I talk of Death?" She goes on to quickly answer her own question: she talks about death because she's close to it as a result of her arduous work.

The seamstress also personifies death, describing it as a "Phantom of grisly bone"—giving death a physical form, a "terrible shape" that seems like it should haunt her. Instead, however, the seamstress claims that she herself looks "so like" this death figure: she's just as thin and terrible looking because she "fasts," too poor to properly feed herself. Even while the imagery in this passage portrays death as something horrible and ugly, the seamstress insists that her condition is already just as miserable; death would barely change her appearance.

Throughout this stanza, the seamstress uses repetition and exclamation points to emphasize her desperation. In two consecutive lines, she repeats, "It seems so like my own," stressing that death's "terrible shape" is like hers. The seamstress's repetition also makes the verse seem more like a song, with this line forming a kind of refrain—an unhappy song, though, with a mournful tone.

Then, in line 39, the seamstress exclaims, "Oh! God!" in what seems like a moment of real agony. She complains that the cost of food is high, while her labor sells for "cheap." But the seamstress refers to her labor as "flesh and blood," again indicating that her body is wasting away as she works. The seamstress blames a society that underpays laborers for her struggles; if she were paid more, she might be able to afford more food, but instead the high price of "bread" makes living almost impossible.

LINES 41-48

"Work—work—work!
My Labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread—and rags.
That shatter'd roof—and this naked floor—
A table—a broken chair—
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there!

Repeating "Work—work—work!" at the start of this stanza, the seamstress again uses epizeuxis to emphasize that all she does is work. She says so explicitly on the next line, complaining, "My Labour never flags," meaning that her work never pauses or eases up. By capitalizing "Labour," the seamstress perhaps suggests that her work is an entity that haunts her, consumes her, like the "Phantom" of "Death" described in the previous stanza.

With another rhetorical question, the seamstress reiterates that she is severely underpaid for all this labor. She asks, "And what are its wages?"—implying that the wages she receives are hardly adequate or fair.

Indeed, the seamstress has only a "bed of straw" to sleep on," a "crust of bread" to eat, and "rags" to wear (which recall the "unwomanly rags" the speaker mentioned in stanza 1). What's more, the seamstress's roof is "shatter'd," or broken, and the floor of her room is "naked" or bare. The only furniture includes a "table" and "broken chair," and perhaps worst of all, the seamstress seems to loathe the "blank" wall she faces every

day.

In fact, she even claims to "thank" her shadow for "falling" on that wall. Presumably she says this hyperbolically, but the notion emphasizes again that her living space is miserable and dull. The internal rhyme between "blank" and "thank" draws readers' attention to this moment, and, thus, to the seamstress's desperation.

Also notice how the seamstress uses frequent dashes throughout this entire passage, as between "table" and "a broken chair" in line 46. These moments of caesura adds to the sense that the seamstress's environment is broken, just like the actual lines of her song. In other words, the song here becomes jolting and cracked, underscoring the disrepair of the seamstress's physical room.

LINES 49-56

"Work—work—work!
From weary chime to chime,
Work—work—work!
As prisoners work for crime!
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Till the heart is sick, and the brain benumb'd,
As well as the weary hand.

This stanza again begins with what by now has become a familiar refrain in the poem: "Work—work—work!" The seamstress sings that she works from "weary chime to chime," or rather, all the time ("chime to chime" invokes the toll of a clock or church bell that rings on the hour).

The diacope of this phrase—that quick repetition of "chime"—hammers home the idea that the seamstress never has a moment to rest. In fact, the seamstress even compares herself to prisoners who "work for crime," emphasizing again that her work is exhausting, tedious, and worst of all, inescapable: like prisoners, the seamstress is trapped, unable to stop working or support herself by any other means. This comparison underscores the dire and desperate condition of the working poor in Victorian England.

Just as she did in stanza 3, the seamstress goes on to sing, "Band, and gusset, and seam, / Seam, and gusset, and band," repeating the same three objects of her work, but changing the order of items from line to line. This use of chiasmus stresses that these things, "band," "gusset," and "seam," occupy the seamstress through her monotonous, repetitive labor, in which she performs the same actions over and over again.

Indeed, the seamstress complains that her "heart is sick" and her "brain benumb'd," meaning she feels depressed and also weakened, unable to think clearly or feel properly alive. It's not just her "hand" that is "weary" from her work: her soul and mind are depleted as well.

LINES 57-64

"Work—work—work,
In the dull December light,
And work—work—work,
When the weather is warm and bright—
While underneath the eaves
The brooding swallows cling
As if to show me their sunny backs
And twit me with the spring.

For the final time, the seamstress again begins a stanza with the poem's steady refrain: "Work—work—work." This time, however, she doesn't use an exclamation point; her tone is more somber now.

Looking beyond her miserable room, the seamstress thinks about everything she's missing in the wider world because she has to work like a prisoner day and night to get by. To prove that her work is constant and unrelenting, the seamstress notes that she works "In the dull December light"—throughout the dreary winter—as well as "When the weather is warm and bright," or rather in the summer. In other words, the seamstress works all year, without no vacation or escape. And the thudding /d/ alliteration of "dull December" evokes the very dullness being described.

Even though she never gets to experience the pleasures of nature, the seamstress imagines that in the warmer months, "brooding swallows cling" to trees, basking in the sun. According to the seamstress, these birds "twit [her] with the spring," chirping to tell her that warm weather has arrived.

The seamstress seems jealous of the birds' freedom: the word "twit" implies that the birds mock her, making her aware of the beautiful world outside her room and dirty city—a world far beyond her reach. In evoking these scenes from nature, the seamstress reveals that her imagination strays outside her unhappy room, even if her body remains trapped in eternal labor. Perhaps thinking about the spring provides some kind of refuge for the seamstress, even if it hurts to know she cannot escape to a more pleasant place.

The sounds of this stanza evoke the calm beauty of the natural world. Take lines 60-61, which are filled with soft /w/ consonance and assonance of the long /ee/ and short /eh/ sounds:

> When the weather is warm and bright—
> While underneath the eaves

Again, then, the poem's language reflects what's being described.

LINES 65-72

"O! but to breathe the breath
Of the cowslip and primrose sweet—

With the sky above my head,
And the grass beneath my feet
For only one short hour
To feel as I used to feel,
Before I knew the woes of want
And the walk that costs a meal!

The tone in stanza 9 becomes truly wistful, as the seamstress wishes she could enjoy the pleasures and freedoms of the natural world. She cries out at the start of the stanza, expressing her intense desire to escape her work. She wants to "breathe the breath" of flowers, like "cowslip and primrose," and feel the sky over her head. She wants to walk in grass, perhaps barefoot.

With just a few details, the seamstress evokes an open meadow—a place quite opposite the confining, dirty room in which she works. She also uses alliteration throughout this stanza, as in "breathe the breath" (also an example of polyptoton) and "woes of want," creating a more poetic feeling to her song as she dreams about flowers and sunny days.

For the first time in the poem, the seamstress also indicates that there was a time in her life when she did get to experience nature—or, at least, she experienced the kind of blissful freedom that comes from wandering in the natural world. She "used to feel" different from how she feels now. Now she feels only the "woes of want," or the burdens of hunger and labor. But at one point in her past, the seamstress didn't have to toil for her food or suffer from a lack of resources. And she sings that she craves "only one short hour" of that freedom; she doesn't need a permanent escape, in other words, but rather just temporary relief from the struggle of her daily work. The seamstress's story seems even more tragic, knowing that she wasn't always this unhappy.

LINES 73-80

"O! but for one short hour!
A respite however brief!
No blessed leisure for Love or Hope,
But only time for Grief!
A little weeping would ease my heart,
But in their briny bed
My tears must stop, for every drop
Hinders needle and thread!"

Once again, the seamstress opens with a sharp exclamation. Her "O!" here is brief and dramatic, capturing the pain and sadness in her voice.

As in the previous stanza, the seamstress says that she wants only "one short hour" of rest, a "respite however brief." It doesn't matter how long she gets to rest; the only important thing is that the seamstress gets a chance to breathe, to rest her weary hands and mind.

However, she has no "blessed leisure for Love or Hope," or rather, no time to experience positive emotions, to love others or feel hope that things will get better. Instead, the seamstress has "only time for Grief." All she can feel as she works is misery and pain, and sorrow that she has to spend her days in such grueling conditions.

Most strikingly, the seamstress claims that she doesn't even have time to cry. Even though crying might make her feel better—"weeping would ease my heart," she sings—the seamstress believes that crying would also slow her work, and thus that it is something that she can't afford to do. The seamstress personifies her tears, imagining that they stop in a "briny bed" (referring to the saltiness of tears, and comparing her eyes to a "bed"). If her tears fell from her eyes, they would "hinder," or interfere with," her "needle and thread." So the seamstress holds back her tears and suffers helplessly. All she can do to gain relief, it seems, is to sing this "Song of the Shirt."

LINES 81-89

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch,—
Would that its tone could reach the Rich!—
She sang this "Song of the Shirt!"

In the final stanza of the poem, the original speaker chimes in again. The seamstress has stopped singing, and the speaker closes the poem almost exactly as it began: this last stanza is identical, except for one line, to the first stanza.

As such, the speaker creates a sort of frame around the "Song of the Shirt" in which the speaker describes the seamstress from an outsider's perspective. Here, the speaker again notes that the seamstress's fingers are "weary and worn," her "eyelids heavy and red," that she wears "unwomanly rags," and stitches away in "poverty, hunger, and dirt." The speaker paints sort of a still-life image of the seamstress, bringing readers back to earth after being were transported by the seamstress's song.

Although this stanza reads like a mirror image of the opening stanza, there are a few key differences. First, by this point, the reader is intimately acquainted with the seamstress through her song. Whereas the first stanza provided a simple, rather objective image, this last stanza invites more compassion for the seamstress, even if the language is actually the same. The speaker and reader have heard her song, understood her pain, and now she is more than a worn-out woman in "unwomanly rags"; she is a real human with intense, painful struggles and deep desires. In other words, although this stanza is merely a copy of the first stanza, it's also so much more: it proves that a poor, miserable woman is more than what she appears. She's not just a seamstress, sewing buttons to make a living; she is a

complex individual with a moving and sorrowful song. Most importantly, hers is a song worth listening to.

The second difference from the opening stanza is perhaps more explicit: the speaker adds an extra line, writing, "Would that its tone could reach the Rich!" The speaker suggests that if "the Rich," presumably referring to the middle and upper classes, could hear the seamstress's song, they might be moved to do something to help. At the very least, they might understand the sufferings of the poor working class and begin to care about problems like inequality, poverty, and hunger.

The poem itself is a testament to the importance of listening to the lower class: simply by listening to and transcribing the "Song of the Shirt," the speaker argues that society should pay more attention to the experience of poor workers and that those with privilege should do more to help those less fortunate.

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Throughout "The Song of the Shirt," both the speaker and the seamstress use specific imagery to portray the horrible living conditions of the working poor.

In the opening stanza, for example, the speaker sets the scene right away by describing the seamstress's fingers as "weary and worn" and her "eyelids heavy and red"—signs of physical distress caused by her endless labor. The seamstress herself uses imagery later in the poem to convey the miserable state of the room where she works. She describes the "shatter'd roof" and "naked floor" of her room, as well as a "blank" wall, a table, and a "broken chair." Evidently, her room is sparsely furnished, uncomfortable, and unpleasant—especially in contrast with the "warm and bright" spring weather the seamstress imagines later in her song.

Finally, the final stanza repeats the same image from the opening stanza, reiterating that the seamstress is physically deteriorating, bearing the burden of her constant and tiresome work. With her "weary" body and "unwomanly rags," she represents the picture of poverty and hunger in Victorian England: an image that might, the speaker hopes, prompt others to do something to help, particularly if they hear her moving and terrible song.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,"
- **Line 20:** "Till the eyes are heavy and dim!"
- **Line 34:** "That Phantom of grisly bone,"
- **Lines 43-44:** "A bed of straw, / A crust of bread—and rags."
- **Lines 45-47:** "That shatter'd roof—and this naked floor—/ A table—a broken chair— / And a wall so blank,"
- **Line 60:** "When the weather is warm and bright—"
- **Lines 61-64:** "While underneath the eaves / The brooding swallows cling / As if to show me their sunny backs / And twit me with the spring."
- **Lines 81-83:** "With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / A woman sat in unwomanly rags,"

EPIZEUXIS

Both the speaker and seamstress use epizeuxis, the quick repetition of words, throughout "The Song of the Shirt." Indeed, the fact that both the speaker and seamstress use epizeuxis of the *same* word, "stitch," makes their voices sound quite similar, if not interchangeable—even though the speaker appears to quote the seamstress's song.

The first example of epizeuxis comes in the opening stanza, as the speaker describes the seamstress at work: "Stitch! stitch! stitch!" The speaker repeats the word "stitch" to emphasize that the seamstress's work is constant and repetitive; she performs the same actions over and over again as she makes clothes.

Similarly, the seamstress opens her song with "Work! work! work!" This instance of epizeuxis, like the example in line 11, again emphasizes the repetitive and tiresome nature of the seamstress's work. The phrase "Work—work—work" itself repeats several times throughout the seamstress's song, proving just how monotonous her work really is! She also uses the phrase "Stitch—stitch—stitch" in stanza 4, drawing attention back to the specific kind of labor she performs.

Read in sequence, these lines all form a kind of refrain that captures the seamstress's mounting passion as she complains bitterly about her work. With no choice but to labor all day, stitching together "band, and gusset, and seam," the seamstress clearly leads a miserable life. Each repetition of "Work—work—work" stresses that the seamstress cannot escape this labor. Meanwhile, repetition also turns her verses into a tuneful, if unhappy, song—which perhaps has the power to "reach the Rich."

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Stitch! stitch! stitch!"
- **Line 9:** ""Work! work! work!"
- **Line 11:** "work—work—work,"
- **Line 17:** ""Work—work—work"
- **Line 19:** "Work—work—work"
- **Line 29:** "Stitch—stitch—stitch,"
- **Line 41:** ""Work—work—work!"
- **Line 49:** ""Work—work—work!"
- **Line 51:** "Work—work—work!"

- **Line 57:** ""Work—work—work,"
- **Line 59:** "work—work—work,"
- **Line 85:** "Stitch! stitch! stitch!"

CHIASMUS

In addition to other kinds of repetition in "The Song of the Shirt," the seamstress uses chiasmus in stanzas 3 and 7. She repeats the three components of her work, three objects that consume her time and attention, switching the order each time (ABC to CBA). In stanza 3, she sings:

> Seam, and gusset, and band,
> Band, and gusset, and seam,

Then in stanza 7, she repeats:

> Band, and gusset, and seam,
> Seam, and gusset, and band.

By repeating these words in quick succession, switching the order only slightly, the seamstress emphasizes the monotonous and repetitive nature of her work. Her tone is weary as she repeats these words; in fact, the change in order perhaps helps capture her unhappiness and boredom, as it doesn't even matter to her which object comes first, band or seam. These lines also feature polysyndeton: those grammatically unnecessary "ands." This adds yet more emphasis to the relentless nature of the seamstress's work, evoking the way the little steps seem to keep piling up and up.

Along with other imagery in the poem, these lines call attention to the small, seemingly irksome details involved in sewing clothes. Whereas the seamstress wants to walk in open meadows, with "the sky above her [head]," instead she must keep her head down and sew together band, gusset, and seam, simply to make the money necessary to stay alive.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam,"
- **Lines 53-54:** "Band, and gusset, and seam, / Seam, and gusset, and band,"

REPETITION

Repetition appears in many (many!) forms throughout "The Song of the Shirt." Anaphora, epizeuxis, refrains, polysyndeton, polyptoton, diacope, and parallelism pile up throughout the poem to evoke the relentless, monotonous nature of the seamstress's work.

The poem opens with anaphora and broader parallelism, for example, repeating the exact same grammatical structure in lines 1 and 2:

> With fingers weary and worn,
> With eyelids heavy and red,

Right away, the repetitive nature of the poem's language suggests the depth of the seamstress's exhaustion.

And the repetition keeps on coming! Both the speaker and seamstress use epizeuxis when they repeat the words "stitch" and "work," as in lines 5 and 9. These lines *themselves* repeat throughout the poem, underscoring the repetitive, monotonous, and obviously unpleasant nature of the seamstress's work.

As previously mentioned in this guide, the seamstress also uses chiasmus to describe more specifically the kind of labor she performs, singing "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam." By repeating these names of objects involved in her work, and by slightly shifting the order in which she repeats them, the seamstress again calls attention to her boredom and unhappiness, and to the tiresome monotony of her life.

Other lines repeat as well, creating a general sense of repetitiveness that pervades the entire poem. For example, the phrase "poverty, hunger, and dirt" appears in lines 6, 30, and 86. Through this repetition, the poem strongly emphasizes that the seamstress lives in miserable and impoverished conditions: she's poor and hungry and dirty, and clearly in need of help from the more fortunate.

And, finally, the seamstress uses more direct repetition in stanza 5. Referring to the "terrible shape" of death, she repeats, "It seems so like my own— / It seems so like my own." This direct repetition calls readers' attention to the seamstress's horrible condition. Her labor and hunger have made her so thin and ghastly that she looks like death itself, and she repeats this not once, but *twice*, to increase the impact and intensity of her song.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "With"
- **Line 2:** "With"
- **Line 3:** "woman," "unwomanly"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Stitch! stitch! stitch! / In poverty, hunger, and dirt,"
- **Line 9:** "Work! work! work!"
- **Line 11:** "work—work—work,"
- **Line 17:** "Work—work—work"
- **Line 18:** "Till the"
- **Line 19:** "Work—work—work"
- **Line 20:** "Till the"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam,"
- **Line 23:** "Till"

- **Line 25:** "O, Men, with"
- **Line 26:** "O, Men! with"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Stitch—stitch—stitch, / In poverty, hunger, and dirt,"
- **Lines 36-37:** "It seems so like my own— / It seems so like my own,"
- **Line 41:** "Work—work—work!"
- **Line 49:** "Work—work—work!"
- **Line 50:** "chime to chime"
- **Line 51:** "Work—work—work!"
- **Lines 53-54:** "Band, and gusset, and seam, / Seam, and gusset, and band,"
- **Line 57:** "Work—work—work,"
- **Line 59:** "And work—work—work,"
- **Line 65:** "O! but"
- **Line 70:** "feel," "feel"
- **Line 73:** "O! but"
- **Line 81:** "With"
- **Line 82:** "With"
- **Line 83:** "woman," "unwomanly"
- **Lines 85-86:** "Stitch! stitch! stitch! / In poverty, hunger, and dirt,"

CAESURA

There are many examples of caesura throughout "The Song of the Shirt." Some examples are more significant and impactful than others.

In the seamstress's refrain ("Work! work! work!" and "work—work—work"), exclamation points and dashes create a sense of jolting, tiresome exertion. The intensity builds between each repetition of the word "work," capturing the seamstress's desperation as she complains about her labor, hunger, and exhaustion.

Similarly, commas separating "Band, and gusset, and seam," call attention to the monotonous repetition of the seamstress's work: she might pause for a moment, but she must immediately pick up the next material and resume sewing, in order to make a living. And when the speaker and seamstress recite, "poverty, hunger, and dirt," the commas in the middle of these lines place additional emphasis on each aspect of the seamstress's condition: she is poor, *and* hungry, *and* dirty, all at the same time.

Other notable instances of caesura occur when the seamstress cries out, "Oh! God!" or "O!" The exclamation points in these lines set the seamstress's cry apart from the rest of the phrase; it feels as if she's pouring out all her emotion into these words.

Finally, the seamstress relies heavily on caesura in stanza 6, when she describes her physical surroundings. Here, dashes between phrases ("A table—a broken chair—") capture the brokenness and disfunction of the seamstress's room; the form of the verse reflects the actual space she's describing. (Note that this is also an example of the poetic device asyndeton, which adds to the poem's fractured feel here.)

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "poverty, hunger, and dirt,"
- **Line 9:** ""Work! work! work!"
- **Line 11:** "work—work—work,"
- **Line 13:** "O! to"
- **Line 17:** "Work—work—work"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam,"
- **Line 25:** "O, Men, with"
- **Line 26:** "O, Men! with"
- **Line 30:** "poverty, hunger, and dirt,"
- **Line 43:** "wages? A"
- **Line 44:** "bread—and"
- **Line 45:** "roof—and"
- **Line 46:** "table—a"
- **Line 47:** "blank, my"
- **Lines 53-54:** "Band, and gusset, and seam, / Seam, and gusset, and band,"
- **Line 55:** "sick, and"
- **Line 65:** "O! but"
- **Line 73:** "O! but"
- **Line 86:** "In poverty, hunger, and dirt,"

ALLITERATION

There are quite a few examples of alliteration in "The Song of the Shirt," which add emphasis and intensity to the speaker's tale. In the very first line of the poem, for example, the yawning /w/ sounds of "**w**eary and **w**orn" seem to evoke the very exhaustion being described. The same can be said for the sharp /c/ sounds of "**c**ock is **c**rowing," which suggest that rooster's shrill sound, and the pounding /b/ of "**b**rain **b**enumb'd," which evoke a dull throbbing.

At other moments, alliteration draws a thematic link between various words. That's the case with "**Sh**roud" and "**Sh**irt" in line 32, where shared sounds reflect the fact that the seamstress's labor (the "Shirt" she's sewing) will be the death of her (her funeral "Shroud").

Alliteration can also simply call *attention* to certain words, phrases, and images in the poem, making them stand out more clearly and memorably for the reader. Note, for example, the sibilance (in the form of both /s/ and /sh/ sounds) makes the "song" of the poem's title ring out more clearly: "**Sh**e sang the 'Song of the **Sh**irt.'"

Altogether, alliteration (along with the related devices consonance and assonance) enhances the poetic feeling of the seamstress's song. Words that start with similar sounds flow well together, making it seem like the seamstress really is singing to herself as she works—portraying her miserable

conditions in musical, even beautiful terms.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "With," "weary," "worn"
- **Line 8:** "She," "sang," "Song," "Shirt"
- **Line 10:** "cock," "crowing"
- **Line 15:** "Where woman," "soul," "save"
- **Line 18:** "brain begins"
- **Line 23:** "asleep"
- **Line 24:** "sew"
- **Line 26:** "Men," "Mothers"
- **Line 32:** "Shroud," "Shirt"
- **Line 36:** "seems so"
- **Line 37:** "seems so"
- **Line 39:** "bread"
- **Line 40:** "blood"
- **Line 43:** "what," "wages"
- **Line 49:** "Work—work—work"
- **Line 50:** "weary"
- **Line 51:** "Work—work—work"
- **Line 55:** "brain benumb'd"
- **Line 58:** "dull December"
- **Line 60:** "When," "weather," "warm"
- **Line 61:** "While"
- **Line 65:** "breathe," "breath"
- **Line 71:** "woes," "want"
- **Line 75:** "leisure," "Love"
- **Line 78:** "But," "briny bed"
- **Line 81:** "With," "weary," "worn"
- **Line 88:** "reach," "Rich"
- **Line 89:** "She," "sang," "Song," "Shirt"

CONSONANCE

Along with frequent alliteration throughout the poem, consonance adds to the poetic feeling of the seamstress's song (note that we've only highlighted a few illustrative examples of consonance here; there are more to find).

For one striking example, note all the repetitive sounds in lines 60-64, where the seamstress describes the beauty of the world outside. Here, consonance mixes with assonance to create a passage filled with music and intensity:

> When the weather is warm and bright—
> While underneath the eaves
> The brooding swallows cling
> As if to show me their sunny backs
> And twit me with the spring.

The sounds of the lines suggest both the beauty of nature and the seamstress's longing for respite from the dreariness of her work.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "With," "weary," "worn"
- **Line 5:** "Stitch! stitch! stitch!"
- **Line 6:** "poverty," "dirt"
- **Line 7:** "still," "voice," "dolorous," "pitch"
- **Line 8:** "She," "sang," "Song," "Shirt"
- **Line 9:** ""Work! work! work!"
- **Line 10:** "While," "cock," "crowing"
- **Line 11:** "And work—work—work,"
- **Line 15:** "Where woman," "soul," "save"
- **Line 18:** "brain begins"
- **Line 21:** "Seam," "gusset," "band"
- **Line 22:** "Band," "gusset," "seam"
- **Line 23:** "buttons," "asleep"
- **Line 24:** "sew"
- **Line 60:** "When," "weather," "warm," "bright"
- **Line 61:** "While"
- **Line 62:** "brooding," "swallows"
- **Line 63:** "sunny backs"
- **Line 64:** "spring"

APOSTROPHE

Partway through her song, the seamstress cries out to the men whom she blames for subjecting women to such endless, exhausting labor. She sings, "O, Men, with Sisters dear!" and "O, Men! with Mothers and Wives!" Then, she goes on to tell these "Men" that they are "wearing out" women's "lives," wasting away real humans when they force women to manufacture clothing to earn a living.

By calling out directly to "Men," the seamstress expresses her exasperation, her feeling that her situation is not just unpleasant, but also unfair. She seems to believe that women are worked too hard, that men take advantage of them, and even of their own sisters, mothers, and wives. Perhaps men are ignorant of how hard women work, or perhaps they don't care and intentionally exploit women laborers. Either way, the seamstress's use of apostrophe captures her deep unhappiness and her profound anger at her situation. She wants someone to blame, so here, she blames the men responsible for creating a society that overworks and severely undervalues female laborers.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** ""O, Men, with Sisters dear! / O, Men! with Mothers and Wives!"

METAPHOR

In the third stanza of her song, the seamstress uses the metaphor of sewing a "Shroud" to convey her feelings toward her work. A shroud is a cloth used to conceal bodies during burial; singing that she's "Sewing at once with a double thread,

a Shroud as well as a Shirt," the seamstress thus implies that her work brings her closer and closer to death every day.

The seamstress claims that her thread is "double"—it sews clothes, but it also sews a metaphorical shroud that will wrap the seamstress when she dies. Through this grim metaphor, the seamstress emphasizes that her work is wearing down her body, preventing her from satisfying her basic needs, let alone living a fulfilling life. The metaphor leads into a stanza about "Death" itself, in which the seamstress continues to expand on the dark themes of death, hunger, and exhaustion that characterize her song.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-32:** "Sewing at once with a double thread, / A Shroud as well as a Shirt."

PERSONIFICATION

The seamstress uses personification to characterize "Death" in stanza 5. Here, she describes Death as a "Phantom of grisly bone," drawing on common tropes of death as a sort of haunting, embodied figure.

At first, it doesn't seem like this Death is human-like; the word "Phantom" and the image of "grisly bone" evoke more of a monster or ghost. However, the seamstress goes on to claim that Death's "terrible shape" "seems so like [her] own." In other words, the seamstress looks like Death because she keeps long "fasts" when she cannot afford to eat.

By personifying Death and comparing herself to Death, the seamstress demonstrates just how weak, emaciated, and "terrible" she looks as a result of her unending labor. That's not to say that she seems vain or overly concerned about appearances; rather, the seamstress simply wants to express how horrible her physical condition has become as a result of her grueling work.

Later in her song, the seamstress loosely personifies her own tears as well. In this case, personification plays a slightly different role. Describing how she cannot spare the time to cry, the seamstress sings that her tears must "stop" "in their briny bed." By comparing her eyes to a "bed" for her tears, the seamstress makes the tone of her song a bit more endearing, a little less harsh. She essentially compares her tears to creatures confined unfairly to their "bed." More than anything, this personification offers another way for the seamstress to convey her sadness. She wants to release her misery in a flood of tears, but instead she regretfully confines her tears to their "briny bed"—both the seamstress and her tears suffer together.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 33-38:** "But why do I talk of Death? / That Phantom of grisly bone, / I hardly fear its terrible shape, / It seems so like my own— / It seems so like my own, / Because of the fasts I keep;"
- **Lines 78-80:** "But in their briny bed / My tears must stop, for every drop / Hinders needle and thread!'"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The seamstress asks two rhetorical questions in her "Song of the Shirt." First, in stanza 5, the seamstress asks, "But why do I talk of Death?" Through this question, the seamstress introduces the idea that she doesn't "fear" Death—and therefore might as well not talk about it—because she herself resembles Death's "terrible shape." In other words, her rhetorical question implies that death is almost irrelevant to the seamstress because she moves closer and closer to her own death every day—and there's nothing she can do to prevent this slow, painful process.

In the following stanza, the seamstress goes on to describe her lifestyle in more detail. She complains that despite her endless and exhausting work, she gains hardly any reward. To stress this point, the seamstress sings, "My Labour never flags; And what are its wages?" She then goes on to list her belongings, the scant items she can afford: "A bed of straw," a "crust of bread," and so on. In this passage, the rhetorical question emphasizes the pitiful nature of the seamstress's wages. She can barely afford to sustain herself because her wages are so low. In asking, "what are its wages?" the seamstress bitterly calls attention to the fact that she is severely underpaid and overworked—and suffers greatly as a result.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 43:** "And what are its wages?"

VOCABULARY

Unwomanly (Line 3, Line 83) - Not showing qualities usually associated with women. The speaker uses the adjective "unwomanly" to suggest that the seamstress's clothes are unfeminine, in a Victorian sense, and poor.

Plying (Line 4, Line 84) - Working with a tool, in this case the seamstress's "needle and thread," in a rhythmic or methodical way.

Dolorous (Line 7, Line 87) - Expressing great sorrow and distress.

Cock (Line 10) - Rooster.

Aloof (Line 10) - Removed and distant—in this case probably physically, not emotionally, given that the seamstress refers to a bird.

Barbarous Turk (Line 14) - The term "Turk" refers specifically

to inhabitants of Turkey, and more generally to people who speak Turkic languages. Here, the seamstress likely uses "Turk" to refer to Muslim people, who she views as "barbarous," or uncivilized, because they are not Christian.

Gusset (Line 21, Line 22, Line 53, Line 54) - A piece of material sewn into clothing in order to strengthen it or change its shape. A collar is an example of a gusset.

Shroud (Line 32) - A cloth used to wrap or cover a dead body for burial.

Phantom (Line 34) - A ghost. In the poem, the seamstress compares "Death" to a "Phantom" to suggest that death is somewhat, but not fully, embodied; it takes some haunting form.

Grisly (Line 34) - Inspiring horror, fear, or deep disgust.

Flags (Line 42) - Become unsteady or slow down.

Benumbed (Line 55) - Deadened; no longer able to feel sensations.

Eaves (Line 61) - The lower border of a roof, which hangs over the wall.

Brooding (Line 62) - Moody, thoughtful, or somber.

Swallows (Line 62) - A kind of small bird, typically with long, pointed wings and a short bill.

Cowslip and primrose (Line 66) - Types of flowers. Cowslip is actually a type of primrose, which has yellow flowers; primrose is a family of flowers that come in a variety of colors.

Woes (Line 71) - Sufferings caused by grief, hardship, or misfortune.

Respite (Line 74) - A temporary rest or relief.

Leisure (Line 75) - Free time to be spent pleasurably—or in this case, simply an opportunity to experience "Love or Hope."

Briny bed (Line 78) - The seamstress refers to her eyes, or perhaps more specifically her tear ducts, as a "briny bed" for her tears. "Briny" refers to the saltiness of tears.

Hinders (Line 80) - Delay, obstruct, or interfere with.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Song of the Shirt" features 11 stanzas, the first 10 of which are eight lines long (making them octaves). The final stanza then has nine lines.

After the opening introduction, the nine central stanzas make up the seamstress's song. Each of these stanzas appears as a quotation from the seamstress. Each of these stanzas can be also be thought of as consisting of two quatrains (four-line stanzas), which each follow an ABCB (and sometimes ABAB) rhyme scheme. Many of the seamstress's stanzas begin with the same refrain ("Work—work—work"), which lends a consistent, even musical feeling to her song.

In contrast to these nine central stanzas, the first and last stanzas come from the main speaker of the poem who introduces the seamstress and transcribes her song. Despite the different speaker, however, these stanzas match the form of the seamstress's song, also including eight lines each. These two stanzas provide a frame for the "Song of the Shirt," as they are identical except for the addition of one extra line in the final stanza. This additional line, "Would that its tone could reach the Rich!" stands out, emphasizing the speaker's plea for more fortunate people to hear the seamstress's song and understand her struggles.

METER

While "The Song of the Shirt" feels rhythmic at times, it has no consistent meter. Some lines, like line 7, have up to 10 syllables, while the poem's refrain—"Work! work! work!"—has only three.

That said, the poem's frequent use of parallelism and repetition creates a somewhat predictable, even monotonous rhythm, which emulates the seamstress's monotonous and repetitive work.

Take the opening stanza: lines 1-3 each open with two iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM rhythm) followed by anapests (feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm); line 4 then opens with a trochee (DUM-da) before moving back into that iamb-anapest pattern:

> With fin- | gers wea- | ry and worn,
> With eye- | lids hea- | vy and red,
> A wo- | man sat, | in unwo- | manly rags,
> Plying | her need- | le and thread—

Much of the poem features a similar mixture of iambs and anapests, and the third and seventh lines of almost every stanza are also longer than the rest (usually having 10 syllables total). This pattern, in turn, gets punctuated by those stark "Stitch! stitch! stitch!" and "Work! work! work!" refrains. Here's the rest of stanza 1, which continues to feature iambs and anapests:

> Stitch! stitch! stitch!
> In po- | verty, hun- | ger, and dirt,
> And still | with a voice | of do- | lorous pitch
> She sang | the "Song | of the Shirt."

As a result, the poem *feels* metered and musical at times. The poem's refrains then disrupt the beat of the seamstress's song to reflect the broken and uncertain nature of her experiences and surroundings.

RHYME SCHEME

The first stanza of "The Song of the Shirt" has the following rhyme scheme:

ABCBDEDE

While a few other stanzas throughout the poem have the same pattern, there is some variation. Many stanzas don't have a rhyme between their fifth and seventh lines (the D lines above), making the second chunk of the pattern DEFE. This alternative pattern can be seen in stanza 4, for example:

ABCBDEFE

Other stanzas also include additional identical rhyme pairs thanks to the seamstress's frequent repetitions, such as when she repeats "Work—work—work" in lines 17 and 19 (technically making this particular stanza's opening rhyme scheme ABAB). Similarly, the repetition of "It seems so like my own" creates an extra rhyme in stanza 5. Finally, the poem deviates from its rhyme scheme in the last stanza, as the speaker adds an extra line—"Would that its tone could reach the Rich!"—which creates an extra rhyming pair in lines 87 and 88.

In general, this rhyme scheme makes the poem feel musical, as if the seamstress really is singing a song. Rhyme gives the poem consistency: the opening and closing stanzas share a similar tone to the seamstress's song, and the seamstress's song itself is repetitive. This steady, rhythmic song reflects the repetitive nature of the seamstress's work. Perhaps the author also wants readers to imagine that the seamstress moves her hands in time to the rhythm of her song.

SPEAKER

"The Song of the Shirt" essentially has two speakers:

- The first speaker only appears in the first and last stanzas. This speaker introduces the seamstress, describing her physical appearance and providing a framework for her "Song of the Shirt."
- The second speaker is the seamstress herself, who "sings" her song throughout the central stanzas of the poem.

Although the poem presents these speakers as two separate characters, they share a similar voice and tone, use the same rhyme scheme and stanza structure, and even repeat certain phrases, like the refrain, "Stitch! stitch! stitch!" These similarities call attention to the fact that the poem is, in fact, a work of fiction, as both speakers are clearly the creation of one author.

While the first speaker remains anonymous, the seamstress's identity is more relevant to the content of the poem. Hood wrote the poem in honor of a widow and seamstress named Mrs. Biddell, but there's no evidence to show that the seamstress who sings the "Song of the Shirt" is meant to represent Mrs. Biddell. Rather, the seamstress more generally represents the poor working class in Victorian England, and poor working women in particular.

Through her song, the seamstress reveals that she works constantly, unhappily, and that she feels like a "prisoner" whose fatigue and hunger bring her close to death. She also reveals that at one point in her life, she was able to feel the pleasures of rest and relaxation: poverty struck only recently, perhaps.

By singing her song, the seamstress doesn't seem to expect anyone to hear her complaints or help her escape her miserable life. Rather, the seamstress only wants to express her grief, to release her emotions, and maybe to distract herself through music as she works. On the other hand, the first speaker is clearly sympathetic toward the seamstress, wishing that her song would "reach the rich" and perhaps move them to help the poor.

SETTING

"The Song of the Shirt" is set in Victorian England. Originally published in 1843, the poem came at a time when the poor working class in England lived in horrible, often inhumane conditions, and the poem gestures to this broader setting through the seamstress's song. The more immediate setting, however, is the room in which the seamstress works. The seamstress describes this setting in her song: it's an unpleasant room, with a "shatter'd roof" and a "naked floor," furnished only with a "bed of straw," "A table—a broken chair— / And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank / For sometimes falling there!" Although the seamstress's mind wanders to more pleasant settings, such as a meadow with "cowslip and primrose sweet," her body is trapped in this prison-like room, the misery of which only adds to her suffering.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hood published "The Song of the Shirt" in a magazine called *Punch* in 1843. *Punch* was established in 1841, and it remained a popular source of humor and satire writings and cartoons through the 20th century.

Though it was originally published anonymously, "The Song of the Shirt" ultimately became one of Hood's most famous works, along with a poem called "The Bridge of Sighs." Like "The Song of the Shirt," "The Bridge of Sighs" touches on themes of poverty and despair. Though Hood was considered a humorous poet for most of his life, he wrote these darker poems when he was on his sickbed; he was unhealthy throughout his life and

died at age 45.

Stylistically, "The Song of the Shirt" fits in with Hood's other poetry. His poems including "A Friendly Address," "I Remember, I Remember," and "Ruth" use similar stanza structures and rhyme schemes. Hood also uses a similarly earnest, engaged tone in many of his other works, even as he explores other (often less somber) themes.

Hood's poems about poverty and the working class recall the work of Charles Dickens, whose novels including *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* painted a vivid picture of life in early Victorian England. Both Hood and Dickens used their work to call attention to the conditions of the working class, even though Hood himself was not politically radical. "The Song of the Shirt" also inspired other works that explore similar themes. For example, Richard Redgrave's painting *The Sempstress* was displayed at the Royal Academy in 1844 accompanied by lines from "The Song of the Shirt." Beatrice Offor's later painting, "It is not the linen you're wearing out, but human creatures' lives," likewise quotes Hood's poem in its title.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hood wrote "The Song of the Shirt" in honor of a widow and seamstress named Mrs. Biddell. Mrs. Biddell made a living by sewing clothes in her home, using materials she received from her employer. When she became desperate for money to feed her children, Mrs. Biddell pawned the clothing she made and went into debt, causing her to be sent to a workhouse.

Workhouses were essentially labor factories, which became common after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 aimed to provide better support for England's poor. Instead, what became known as the "new Poor Law" subjected workers to extremely unpleasant conditions; unfortunately, Mrs. Biddell's circumstances probably only worsened when she left her home, though little is known about her fate.

Supposedly, Hood saw an article about Mrs. Biddell in *The Times*, which inspired him to write "The Song of the Shirt." Upon publication in *Punch*, the poem was instantly successful. It circulated widely, drawing attention to the conditions of England's working poor, and also inspiring spin-off works of literature and art that further explored the inhumane experiences of the lower classes.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Mrs. Biddell and the Victorian Court — Learn more about the historical context of "The Song of the Shirt," from a website dedicated to Charles Dickens and his society. (https://www.thecircumlocutionoffice.com/blog/song-shirt-biddell/)
- Workhouses and the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 — Discover the legislation that subjected people like Mrs. Biddell, who inspired "The Song of the Shirt," to horrible experiences in Victorian workhouses. (https://navigator.health.org.uk/theme/workhouses-and-poor-law-amendment-act-1834)
- Punch Magazine — Learn more about the magazine in which Hood originally published "The Song of the Shirt." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch_(magazine))
- Richard Redgrave's "The Sempstress" — Take a look at a painting inspired by "The Song of the Shirt." (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/redgrave-the-sempstress-t14166)
- "The Song of the Shirt" Read Aloud — Listen to a recording of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNOvdDpODT4)
- Musical rendition of "The Song of the Shirt" — Hear one artist turn "The Song of the Shirt" into a musical song. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIP9-9cNpPw)
- Biography of Thomas Hood — Read about the poet who wrote "The Song of the Shirt." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hood)
- "It is not the linen you're wearing out, But human creatures lives" — This painting by Beatrice Offor borrows a quote from "The Song of the Shirt" in its title. (https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/it-is-not-the-linen-youre-wearing-out-but-human-creatures-lives-134073)

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